

# The impact of narratives on policy- making at the national level

The case of the United Kingdom

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## Abstract

This report analyses how different narratives on migration shape and are deployed in political debate and policymaking in the United Kingdom. It investigates how political actors process salient narratives on migration that emerge in the public and political domain and how they inform policy. Of particular interest is the question of how often simplistic, emotive narratives on migration circulating in sections of the British media and political debate are processed in policy-making spheres. Focusing on three case studies, the 2015 'migration crisis', the Ukrainian refugee crisis in 2022 and 'small boat' arrivals in 2022, the report aims to elucidate how migration narratives 'move' across mass media coverage, political debate, and policymaking. The first section sets out long-standing narratives on migration in the UK, key political and policy developments over the past decade and the salience of immigration and public opinion. Deploying a unique methodology to trace government strategies for responding to narratives, the second section analyses the dominant narratives in the British press, parliamentary debate, and policy documentation in each of the three cases. In the third and final section, the report concludes that there is considerable alignment in narratives across the media, political debate, and policy documents. Despite variations in narrative style, policy-making venues appear to embrace more 'lay' and populist narratives invoked in political debate. Moreover, narratives are often embedded in long-standing 'master' narratives on migration in the United Kingdom.

**Keywords:** migration, narratives, policymaking, United Kingdom

## Acronyms

BAME	Black, Asian and minority ethnic
Brexit	Britain's exit from the European Union
BN(O)	Britain overseas nationals
CEAS	Common European Asylum System
COSAC	Conference of Parliamentary Committees for Union Affairs of Parliaments of the European Union
CUKC	Citizens of the UK and Colonies
DLUHC	Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities
ESS	European Social Survey
EU	European Union
GDI	Gross Domestic Income
HC	House of Commons
MEP	Member of the European Parliament
MP	Member of Parliament
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
UASC	Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children
UK	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
UKIP	United Kingdom Independence Party
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
US	United States of America
WWII	Second World War

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# 1. Introduction

In recent years, the concept of ‘narratives’ has gained traction in migration research across the social sciences (Boswell 2011; Triandafyllidou 2018; Sigona 2018; Şahin Mencütek 2021). However, we still know little about how narratives on migration influence political debate and policymaking (Boswell 2011; Boswell, Geddes, and Scholten 2011). This report examines how narratives on migration are taken up in and influence political debate and policy-making in the United Kingdom (UK). It is one of six national reports produced for BRIDGES work package 7, in collaboration with research conducted on Italy, Spain, Germany, France, and Hungary. It investigates how political actors process salient narratives on migration that emerge in the public domain, what role narratives play in the policy-making process, and how they inform policy. Of particular interest is the question of how often simplistic, emotive narratives on migration circulating in sections of the British media and political debate are processed in policy-making spheres. Popular, ‘lay’ narratives may imply quite polarising, unfeasible, or punitive policy measures, which are not underpinned by available experience and evidence on migration dynamics. Existing research shows that such narratives are frequently inconsistent with liberal democratic norms, economic considerations, or international commitments (see, for instance, Hollifield 1992; 1999; Freeman 1995; Joppke 1998). We aim to elucidate how such popular, ‘lay’ narratives ‘move’ across mass media coverage, political debate, and policy-making in the UK.

In order to understand these dynamics, we adopt Jones and McBeth’s (2010) Narrative Policy Framework (NPF). The benefit of applying this definition of a narrative is that it explicitly links narratives and policy preferences, capturing political actors’ issue definition (the ‘problem’) and their justification and legitimation of available policy ‘solutions’. The framework identifies four narrative components comprising both the form and content of a policy narrative:

- (1) *settings, consisting of factors such as geography, laws, evidence and other policy consequential factors not captured in one of the other form elements;*
- (2) *characters, consisting of victims who are harmed, or at least potentially so, villains who perpetuate the harm, and heroes who bring promise of alleviating the harm;*
- (3) *plots that situate the characters relative to the setting and each other within space and across time; and,*
- (4) *a moral of the story, which is a policy solution or a call to action. (Jones and McBeth 2020, 96)*

In alignment with the wider BRIDGES project, the research also apply Schmid’s (2008) conceptualisation of the ‘communicative’ and ‘coordinative’ dimensions of policy-making. The former refers to political communication in the public domain, in the media or in Parliament; the latter refers to discourse among policy-makers (see also Garcés-Masareñas and Pastore 2022, 9). A key goal of this research is to understand what types of narratives are most likely to be (re)produced and adopted in these different spheres (‘pervasiveness’) and how this informs/impacts policy-making (‘transformativity’) (Garcés-Masareñas and Pastore 2022, 7–10). We posit that two distinct types of narratives characterise the different discursive spheres (Boswell and Smellie 2023). The first type, ‘lay’ narratives, comprises simplistic, accessible, and emotive stories, which one might expect in the ‘communicative’ sphere. The second type

is referred to as ‘technocratic’ narratives that are comparatively sombre, complex and evidence-based, which one might expect to steer policy-making in policy venues. While venues may comprise a mix of communicative and coordinative functions, the expectation is that the further a narrative ‘travels’ from media to policy-making, the more technocratic it becomes.

To operationalise the analysis, this research deploys a new methodology for analysing how narratives on migration ‘travel’ across the media, political debate and policy-making. In particular, we explore how far narratives on migration are embraced, adapted, rejected or ignored by actors in both political settings and in more technocratic venues of policy-making<sup>1</sup>. This approach is applied to compare the diffusion and impact of narratives during three episodes of intense political debate between 2012 and 2022. The focus is on events or debates on arrivals/immigration crises at the border to complement research undertaken in Work Package 3. The first two events were selected based on a comparative research design: migration narratives on 1) the European Union (EU) relocation scheme during the so-called migration crisis in 2015 and 2) responses to the Ukrainian refugee crisis. The third case study focuses on the British context of 3) ‘small boat’ arrivals from France in 2022.

The remainder of the report is structured in three parts. The first section sets out key narratives on migration that have prevailed in British public and political discourse over the decades. It also provides a summary of political and policy developments between 2012-2022 and an overview of the salience of migration issues and public opinion. Section two comprises the bulk of the analysis of the three case studies. In each case, I analyse how the narratives circulating in the British media are taken up or responded to in political debate and, in turn, how political narratives are taken up in policy-making venues. The third and concluding section summarises the key insights and findings from the case studies.

## 2. UK Background and Context

### 2.1 Key Narratives on Migration in the UK

The United Kingdom (UK) has been considered a country of immigration for over four decades. As a result, public and political discourses on migration are deeply embedded in longstanding public philosophies (Favell 1998), national identity, the UK’s historical ties and colonial past, as well as current affairs and domestic politics (explored in the next section). Discourse on migration tends to be extremely polarised, portraying immigration/migrants as either a threat (security frame), a moral/normative responsibility (humanitarian frame), or, less frequently, as contributors to British society. Narratives on migration are rooted in beliefs regarding ‘good’ vs. ‘bad’ immigration and definitions of the ‘deserving’/‘underserving’ migrant. These dichotomies

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the conceptual approach and operationalisation of this research refer to BRIDGES Working Paper 19 (Boswell and Smellie 2023). In this working paper we define ‘lay’ and ‘technocratic’ narratives, indicating their key features and roles in the two discursive spheres. We also unpack the relationship between narratives in the media, political debate and policy-making, before setting out a methodology for the analysis of how narratives ‘travel’ across spheres and venues.

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can be identified in a number of what we call ‘master’ narratives that have developed and prevailed in British public and political discourse over time.

Migrants in public and political discourse are often framed in one of two economic lights: **economic benefit or burden** (Bennett 2018). Labour migrants either contribute to the economy by filling jobs, paying taxes, and supporting an ageing population; or as burdens on public services and the welfare system. These narratives, which are strongly rooted in the ‘deserving/good’ vs. ‘underserving/bad’ migration polemic, can be traced back to the UK’s first immigration legislation. The 1905 Aliens Act defined in law the concept of an “underserving immigrant” as a person who is a drain on the welfare system or engages in criminal behaviour (Ibrahim and Howarth 2018). This narrative can vary based on the specific immigrant group in question or the broader context. For example, when the Labour Party came to power in 1997, the British Government disseminated the narrative that high-skilled immigration was beneficial, whereas low-skilled immigration and asylum were perceived as a strain on the British welfare state.

More recently, the narrative gained traction in relation to EU free movement. Negative sentiment towards EU migration increased following the enlargement in 2004, when the UK, Ireland and Sweden were the only countries not to impose a moratorium on free movement from the new member states, resulting in a significant underestimation of the number of new arrivals from the A8 countries in the first year(s). In the second half of the 2000s, the **EU migration narrative** took two distinct forms. First, the protectionist notion that uncontrolled EU migration was a strain on the welfare state and EU workers, willing to work for lower wages, were taking jobs away from British nationals (see, for instance, Prime Minister Gordon Brown’s “British jobs for British workers” slogan in 2009 (Summers 2009)). The counter-narrative was that the so-called “Polish plumber” migrants were skilled, hardworking, and well-integrated contributors to British society.

This is strongly related to a second group of narratives on **controlled versus uncontrolled migration**. These narratives contrast ‘good’ immigrants who come through ‘legal’ channels with those who live or enter irregularly, often referred to as ‘illegal’ or ‘clandestine’ migrants. It ties into debates about border control, sovereignty, and national security. When the Conservative-led coalition government with the Liberal Democrats assumed office in 2010, they promised to control immigration and introduced a target to reduce net migration to the “tens of thousands”. The political discourse during the ensuing decade can best be described as dominated by an immigration control narrative. Immigration control has since been described as an obsession of the Conservative Party (Hampshire and Bale 2015). The 2016 referendum on the UK’s membership of the EU (Brexit) brought particular attention to this narrative, with “taking back control” of the UK’s borders being a major slogan of the Leave campaign.

A variation on the juxtaposition of the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ migrant can be found in the **refugees versus economic migrants narrative**. In this narrative, refugees, seen as fleeing persecution and therefore deserving of protection, are contrasted with migrants perceived as moving primarily for economic benefit. The latter group is viewed with more scepticism. A key theme is the notion that economic migrants pretend to be asylum seekers to take advantage of liberal asylum policies. A distinction is made between ‘genuine refugees’ and so-called ‘bogus asylum seekers’. In its most recent iteration, the method by which an



asylum seeker reaches the UK determines which group they belong to; resettlement to the UK ('genuine refugee') or entering the country irregularly ('bogus asylum seeker'). The latter are frequently portrayed as criminals or potential terrorists who have been trafficked/smuggled into the UK by criminal gangs. A central intersecting idea is the notion of **deterrence**, namely, that 'uncontrolled' immigration, such as asylum (and 'bogus asylum seekers'), can be brought under control by imposing measures designed explicitly to deter people from coming to the UK.

A related narrative, and arguably the most extreme form of the 'uncontrolled' immigration narrative, is the **invasion narrative**. A historical narrative, it can be traced back to Enoch Powell's infamous 'Rivers of Blood' speech in 1968 on race relations and the impact of Commonwealth immigration (Comte 2021). This narrative emerges in two recurrent forms about the UK. The first is related to 'immigration pressure' and the concept that the country is 'full' or under pressure due to immigration. Concerns about housing, infrastructure, and public services often feature in this discourse. The second is more closely related to the notion of a crisis developing at the border ('the hordes at the gates'). Both tend to emerge in times of economic downturn or other perceived 'crises'. The latter narrative re-emerged most recently in commentary on 'small boat' arrivals across the English Channel since 2018.

In contrast to these distinctly protectionist and securitised narratives, another prevailing master narrative in the UK relates to a perceived **tradition of humanitarianism** (Ibrahim and Howarth 2018). Especially relevant in discussions about refugees or those fleeing conflict, this narrative frames the UK as having a moral duty to offer sanctuary to those in need. The narrative emphasises the role the UK has played in the past in offering a 'safe-haven' to those fleeing persecution, such as in the *Kindertransport* during WWII and the Huguenots (Gibney 2004; Shaw 2015). The Syrian refugee crisis in 2015/16 brought particular attention to this narrative and sparked political debate on the UK's international role and responsibilities during the migration crises.

Finally, immigrants from former colonies or the Commonwealth are sometimes regarded in a different light to other migrant groups due to historical, cultural, and linguistic ties. The narrative recalls the UK's imperial past and its ongoing relationship with former colonies, which has resulted in a **multi-racial and multicultural society** in Britain. This narrative can be traced back to state-promoted multiculturalism through the development of nationality law, and progressive race relations legislation since the 1980s (Favell 1998). The discourse depicts immigration as bringing cultural diversity and enrichment, making UK society more vibrant and cosmopolitan. An example of the prevalence of this narrative can be found in the recent establishment of the 'Windrush Day' (22 June) in 2018, which has cemented the arrival of the HMT Empire Windrush from Jamaica in 1948 as the origin story of 'multi-racial' Britain (largely ignoring other migrant groups already in the UK or who arrived via different routes (Perry 2018; Peplow 2019)).

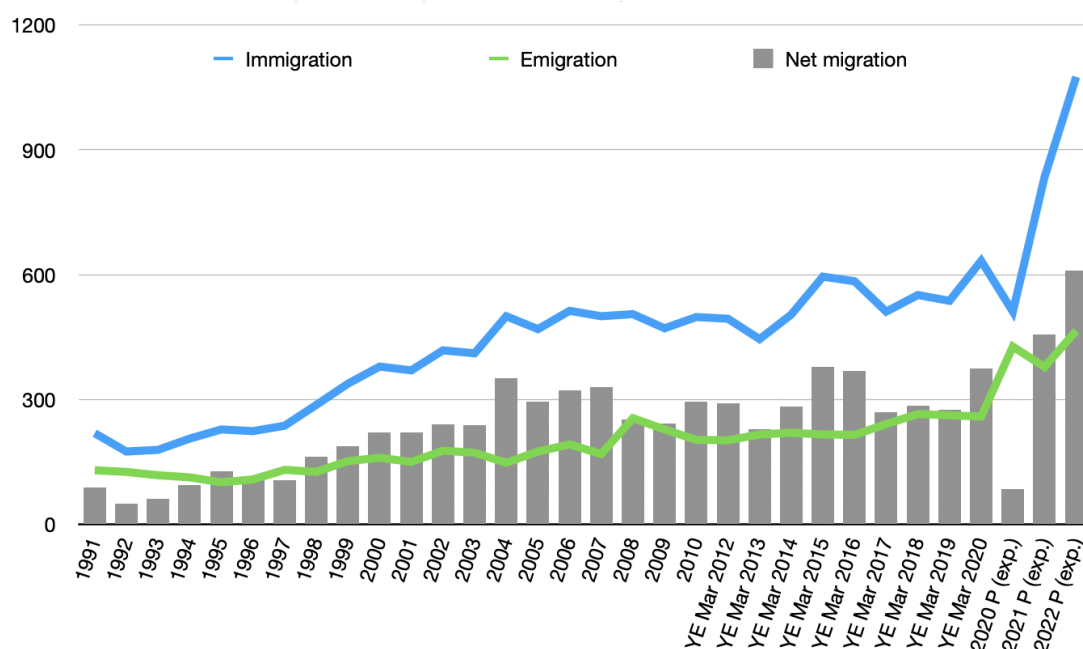
## 2.2 Political Developments and Policy Debates (2012 – 2022)

Migration narratives are also deeply influenced by the extreme politicisation of the issue in political discourse in the UK. An estimated 14% of the population of the UK, or 9.5 million UK residents, are non-UK born or non-British nationals (ONS 2020). Net migration to the UK has steadily increased since the early 1990s, as illustrated by Figure 1. This trend reflects

economic developments, wider trends in Europe and geopolitical unrest, most recently in Afghanistan, Hong Kong, and the Ukraine. Notably, successive governments in recent years have politicised net migration by putting it at the top of their political agenda.

The Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government under Prime Minister David Cameron and Home Secretary Theresa May introduced a **net migration target** in 2010, which was reaffirmed by the Conservative government in May 2015, promising to reduce net migration to the “tens of thousands” (Conservative Party 2015). This commitment profoundly shaped the political rhetoric and policy approach to immigration in the UK. Reaching a peak of +336,000 net migration in 2016, the target ultimately failed before being scrapped in 2019. However, it managed to make the immigration debate in the UK one of numbers and has irreversibly affected how immigration policy and policy success is measured (Boswell 2015).

**FIGURE 1: Estimates of Long-term International Immigration, Emigration and Net Migration to the UK (non-British) (1991-2022)**



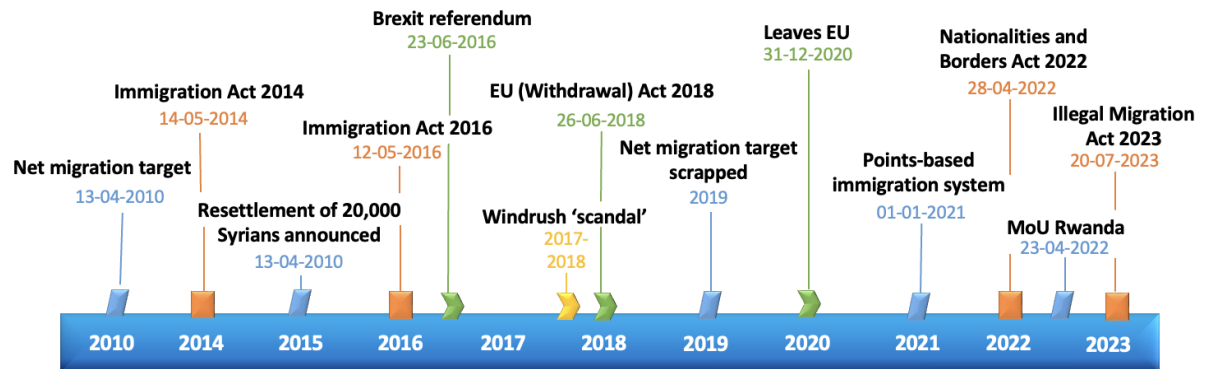
Source: ONS, Long-term international migration (LTIM) time series, Table 2, for 1991 to 2010; LTIM estimates, year ending March 2020, Table 1, for YE Mar 2012 to YE Mar 2020; LTIM, provisional and experimental, year ending December 2022 for 2020 to 2022.

The Boris Johnson administration quietly scrapped the target in 2019 once the public salience of immigration issues had significantly decreased following the referendum on the UK’s membership of the EU (see section 2.3). The debate then pivoted back to welcoming (high-skilled) labour migration. Nevertheless, the target was back on the political agenda post-COVID-19 pandemic after net migration reached its highest recorded levels with a provisional estimate of +606,000 in 2022 (ONS 2023). According to the Office of National Statistics, this increase was driven by a sharp rise in non-EU immigration (925,000 people) for work, study, and humanitarian purposes, including arrivals from Ukraine and Hong Kong.

The last decade has seen the enactment of no fewer than four immigration acts, depicted in Figure 2. The Immigration Act 2014 and Immigration Act 2016 constituted another

paradigmatic shift in immigration policy by implementing the so-called “**hostile environment for illegal migrants**” policy, which targeted irregular migration. First announced in 2012 by Home Secretary Theresa May, this policy introduced a range of measures designed to make it untenable to live in the UK without the right to remain. This included outsourcing (administrative) responsibilities for checking immigration status to landlords, the NHS, banks, and higher education institutions, among other measures.

**FIGURE 2: Timeline of Migration Policy Events and Developments (2010-2023)**



Source: author's elaboration

The consequences of the ‘hostile environment’ measures to tackle irregular migration directly contributed to the so-called **Windrush scandal**. In a series of harrowing interviews published over several months in *The Guardian*, investigative journalist Amelia Gentleman and rights activists highlighted the plight of British citizens from former British colonies faced with destitution and deportation because they could not prove their arrival date in the UK. The scandal revealed dehumanising deportation targets in the Home Office and ultimately resulted in the resignation of Home Secretary Amber Rudd in April 2018. Despite a damning independent review of the policies (see Williams 2020) and some softening of language (the government now refers to the ‘compliant environment’ policy), the policies themselves have not been amended.

The so-called **migration crisis** in 2015/2016 was framed by the government as a crisis in the UK despite the relatively low number of asylum applications. The UK received 38,370 first-time asylum applications in 2015, representing 3% of first-time asylum claims lodged in the EU and a 19% increase from 2014 (Eurostat 2016). This is compared with 84,130 applications for asylum registered in 2002 (Home Office 2003). The **Calais** ‘migrant crisis’ in the summer of 2015, when a record number of migrants from the camps in and around Calais tried to reach the UK via the Eurotunnel terminal in Coquelles, France, represented the most tangible manifestation of the wider European crisis. Nevertheless, the Syrian refugee crisis and developments in the EU ignited a nationwide debate on the UK’s roles and responsibilities in the international community.

Whether the UK should support its European neighbours or continue to focus on humanitarian aid to Syria and the region became the focus of political debate. As we will see in section 2.1, **resettlement** from UN refugee camps in the region or **relocation** from within the EU was highly contested. The Conservative government ultimately bowed to pressure from Conservative

backbenchers<sup>2</sup>, the opposition, and the public in September 2015 to expand the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement programme set up in January 2014, announcing that the UK would welcome 20,000 Syrian refugees from the region within the Parliament (5 years). Family reunion laws and **unaccompanied asylum-seeking children** in Europe were also thematised, resulting in the so-called Dubs amendment to the Immigration Act 2016, which set out a commitment to welcome unaccompanied asylum-seeking children stranded in mainland Europe to the UK.

The UK's exit from the EU (Brexit) marked the most significant development during this timeframe. In the run-up to the **Brexit** referendum in June 2016, immigration issues became central to the debate (Dennison and Geddes 2018; Favell and Barbulescu 2018; Taggart and Szczerbiak 2018). The Leave campaign politicised immigration based on the narrative of "taking back control" of the UK's borders from EU institutions. Whereas Prime Minister Cameron, representing the Remain campaign, shifted his position on immigration towards the 'populist right' by trying to renegotiate access to in-work benefits for EU nationals in the Withdrawal Agreement, legitimising narratives that problematised EU immigration as a drain on the UK's welfare system.

Intriguingly, as we will see in the next section, the salience of migration significantly declined following the Brexit referendum in 2016, and political debate on a post-Brexit immigration system mainly focused on technocratic issues and policy minutia. The Conservative government's landslide election victory in 2019 gave Cameron's successor, Boris Johnson, a huge mandate to "get Brexit done", which marked not only the end of EU free movement but also the introduction of a new points-based immigration system (visa regime) under the Immigration, Nationality and Asylum (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 that prioritises high-skilled labour migration, and the introduction of an EU settlement scheme for EU nationals already resident in the UK. From 31 January 2020, the UK was no longer party to the Dublin regulation and EURODAC.

An increase in the number of 'small boat' arrivals since Brexit has reignited public and political debate on irregular migration. To address the perceived 'threat' of this new irregular migration route across the English Channel from France, the government introduced a new immigration act designed to tackle the economic model of people smuggling. The Nationality and Borders Act 2022 contains provisions on asylum, immigration, nationality, and human trafficking. Notably, it restricts rights based on the route through which an asylum seeker enters the country; a provision that enables the proposed '**outsourcing** of **asylum processing**' set out in a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the government of Rwanda to establish an asylum transfer scheme. The move sparked fierce debate and opposition to what has been described as a hollowing out of the UK's humanitarian protection regime (Refugee Council 2022). This approach of 'deterrence' was further solidified in law in the Illegal Migration Act 2023, which ensures that those who arrive in the UK irregularly are detained and removed to their country of origin or a safe third country.

Finally, several exogenous events also impacted immigration policy in the UK between 2012-2022, including the protests in **Hong Kong**. In January 2021, the UK launched a bespoke immigration route for British nationals overseas (BN(O)) status holders and their families from

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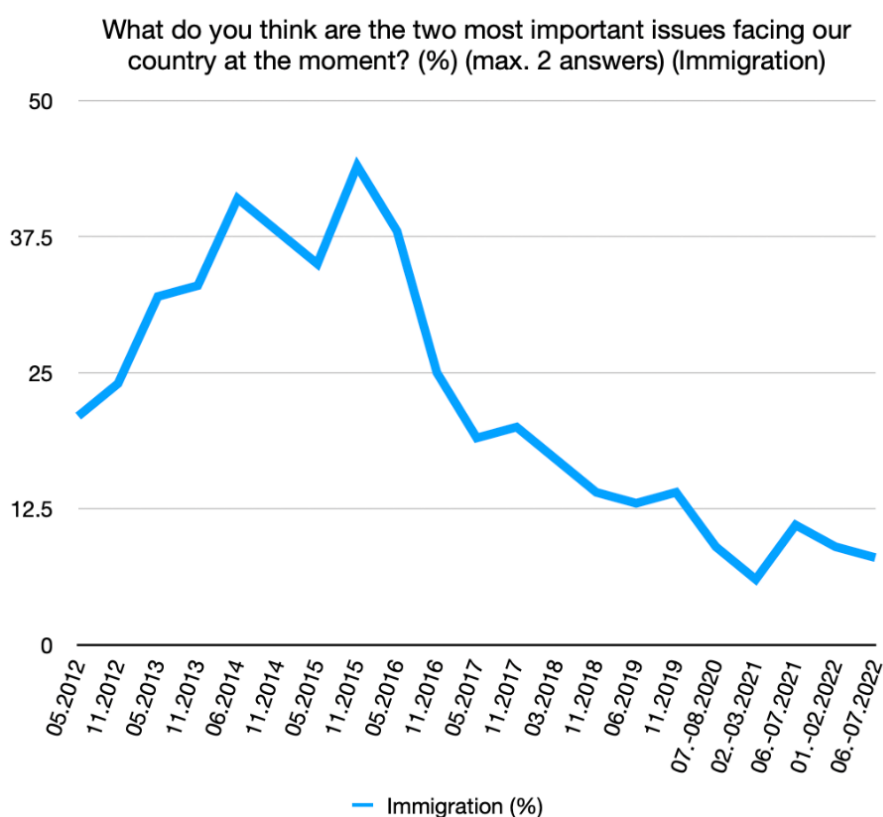
<sup>2</sup> A 'backbencher' refers to a Member of Parliament (MP) who does not hold office in the government or the opposition and who sits behind the front benches in the House of Commons.

Hong Kong. The **Afghanistan** humanitarian and displacement crisis resulted in a new resettlement programme akin to the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement programme. Finally, the war in Ukraine resulted in the implementation of three new visa schemes for those fleeing Russia's invasion, which is explored in more detail in section 3.2.

## 2.3 Salience and Public Attitudes (2012 – 2022)

The salience of migration and public attitudes towards immigration have changed significantly in the UK over the last decade. The bi-annual Eurobarometer survey illustrated by Figure 3 suggests that the salience of immigration peaked in the autumn of 2015 when 44% of respondents mentioned it as one of the country's two most important issues.

**FIGURE 3: Salience of Immigration in the UK (2012-2022)**

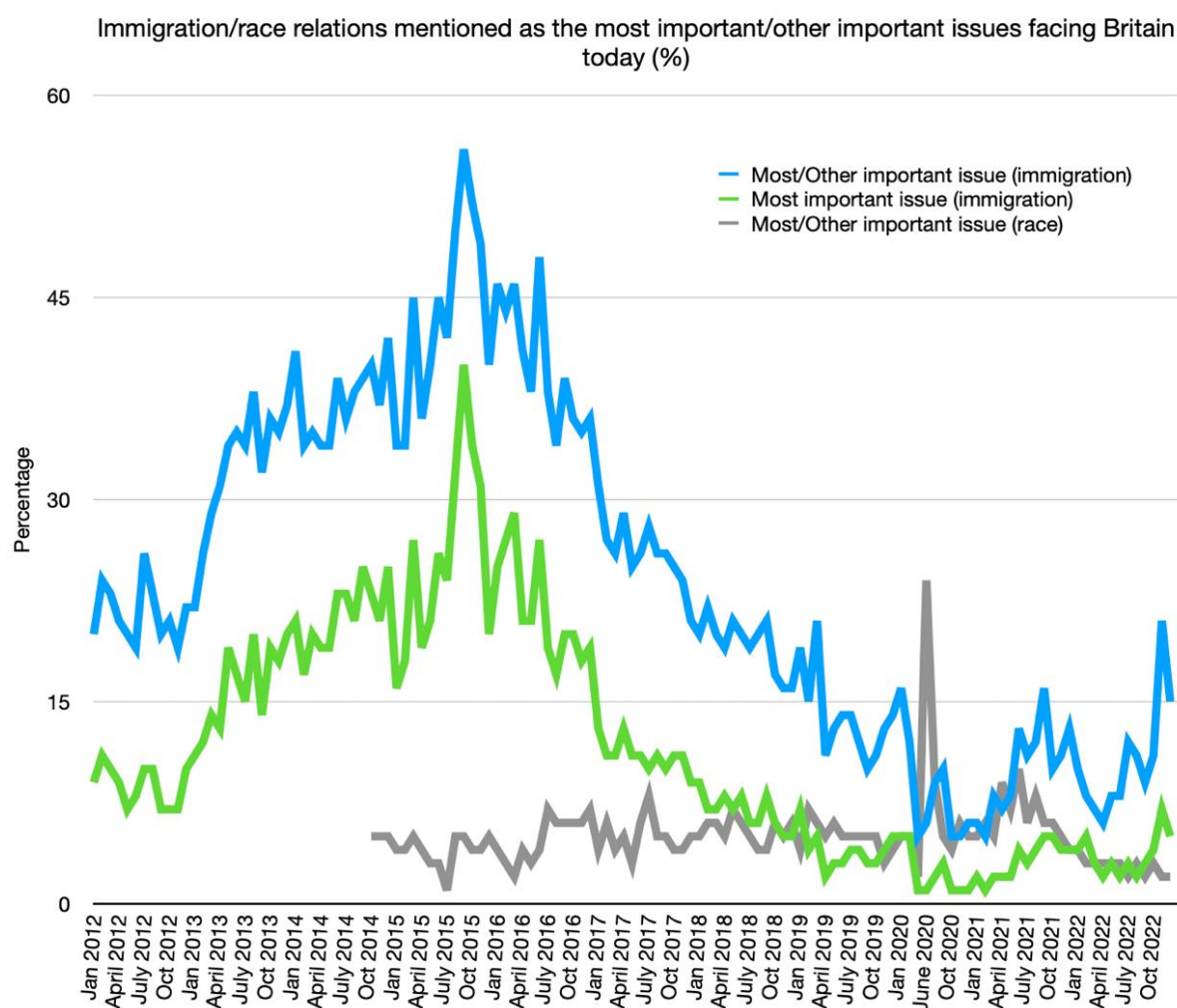


Source: Data extracted from the standard bi-annual Eurobarometer survey, issues 77-97.

A substantial decline in the salience of immigration can be observed from the summer of 2016 onwards. The data suggests that despite a slight spike in 2021 (11%), immigration has not reached similar levels of salience since. This is somewhat counterintuitive given that, as we saw in Figure 1, overall net migration has been increasing since 1992. This supports the proposition that the salience of immigration issues among the British public does not correlate with the number of migrants entering the country.



**FIGURE 4: Issue Index (2012-2022)**



Source: Ipsos Issue Index. Note: immigration and race relations were separated out from October 2014. No data available for March, May, and August 2020.

This finding is supported by more fine-grained analysis. The [Ipsos Issues Index](#) is a monthly survey of the British public on ‘the most important’ or ‘other important issue’ facing Britain today’, including ‘immigration’ and ‘race relations’. As Figure 4 illustrates, the salience of immigration increased in the first half of 2013 reaching 38% in August. A survey at the time suggested that 55% of the British public thought that the level of immigration needed to be addressed to bring the financial crisis to an end (Ipsos 2013). You will also note that net migration had been falling for two years at this point (see Figure 1).

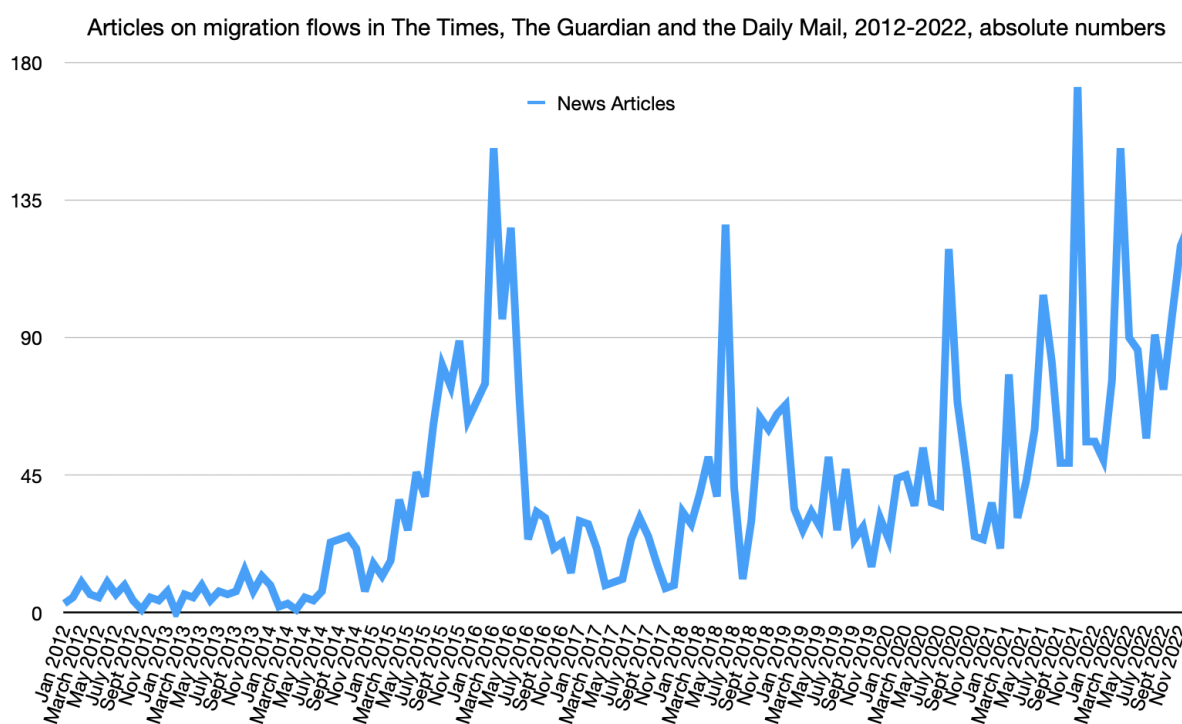
The salience of immigration continued to rise and spiked in September 2015, with 56% of respondents mentioning it as one of the most important issues facing the country; the highest level of concern ever recorded about immigration. This coincided with the image of the drowned Syrian boy, Alan Kurdi, going viral<sup>3</sup>. It also corresponded with intense political debate in the House of Commons on the UK’s role in the European migrant crisis and wider Syrian

<sup>3</sup> For analysis of the impact of this now iconic image on public sentiment see, for example, Vis and Goriunova 2015; Bozdag and Smets 2017; Klein and Amis 2020.

refugee crisis (as we will see in section 3.1). Immigration peaked again in June 2016 in the run-up to the Brexit referendum, with 48% of respondents mentioning it. The significant decline in the salience of immigration, thereafter, suggests that the perception among the British public was that the issue had been resolved by the Brexit referendum. Following a low in 2020 (only 5% mentioned immigration as an issue in October and November 2020), we can then observe an increase in the salience of immigration in September 2021 (16%, up 4% on the previous month) and again in November 2022, when one in five regarded immigration as one of the biggest issues facing the country (21%). This represented a 10% increase from the previous month.

Concerns about ‘race relations’, which was separated out from ‘immigration’ from October 2014 onwards, remained comparatively stable and insignificant until June 2020, when 24% of respondents identified it as one of the most important issues facing the UK (an increase of 22% from the previous month). According to the report, fieldwork carried out for the Issue Index corresponded with the funeral of George Floyd following his murder at the hands of a police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota, the first Black Lives Matter protests in London, and the toppling of the Edward Colston statue by protesters in Bristol (Ipsos 2020a).

**FIGURE 5: Salience of Immigration in the British Press (2012-2022)**



Source: *The Times*, *The Guardian*, the *Daily Mail*/*Mail on Sunday*, via Nexis UK newspaper database.

Intriguingly, the apparent decline in the salience of immigration issues since the Brexit referendum, illustrated in Figures 3 and 4, is not reflected in media coverage on the topic. Figure 5 illustrates the number of articles addressing immigration issues published in *The Times*, *The Guardian*, and the *Daily Mail* per month between January 2012 and December

2022<sup>4</sup>. As expected, we can observe significant spikes in immigration-related coverage during the 2015/2016 migration crisis. However, once again, this trend does not directly correspond with public salience. News coverage was still increasing in 2016, whilst public salience peaked in September 2015. Similarly, the spike in coverage in August 2020 (119 articles identified) corresponded with the lowest levels of salience on immigration, with the public expressing concerns about the COVID-19 pandemic (75%) and the economy (36%) instead (Ipsos 2020b).

High media coverage of immigration issues in 2021 and 2022 more closely corresponds with the significant increase in net migration and increased concern regarding immigration among the British public. This coincided with the two immigration acts making their way through Parliament (see Figure 2), increased political engagement on 'small boat' arrivals from France, debates on the Memorandum of Understanding between the British and Rwandan governments, and, significantly, Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Meanwhile, the spike in coverage in June 2018 coincided with the European Council migration summit, Italian Prime Minister Matteo Salvini's decision to turn away the Aquarius, a ship carrying 629 people rescued from the Mediterranean, and extensive coverage of US President Donald Trump's immigration policies.

Moving now from salience to public opinion on immigration, the European Social Survey (ESS) suggests that not only has the salience of immigration fallen since the Brexit referendum in the summer of 2016, but public opinion has also become more positive towards immigration. The data from the past seven rounds of the ESS, illustrated in Figure 6, shows that the number of respondents stating that the UK is made a 'better place' by immigration (selecting 6, 7, 8 or 9 on the scale) has increased since 2014, whilst the number of respondents suggesting it is made a 'worse place' has decreased since 2016 (see Figure 6).

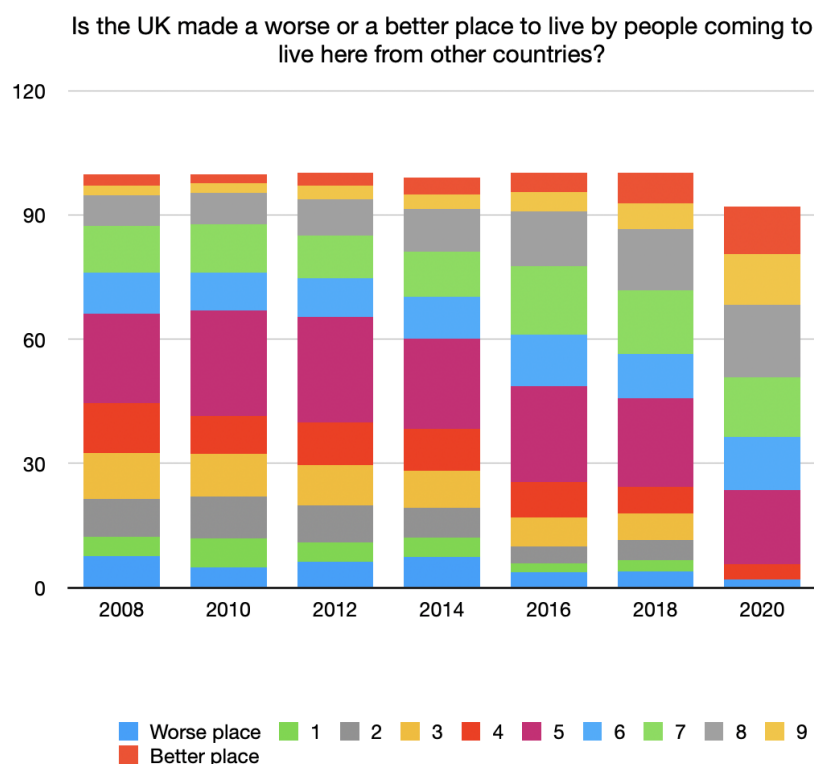
This finding is supported by other surveys, including an Ipsos survey conducted in collaboration with British Future since 2015, which suggests that attitudes towards immigration were relatively positive in 2022, with 46% of people stating immigration had a positive impact on Britain compared with 29% stating it had a negative impact (Ipsos 2022). More significantly, the proportion of people wanting to see immigration reduced ('a little' or 'a lot'), continued to decrease, year on year, to 42% in February 2022, compared with 67% in February 2015. Meanwhile, those wanting to see an increase in immigration continued to rise to 22% in 2022, compared with 10% in 2015. Moreover, when members of the British public were asked in a Eurobarometer survey, which possible consequences of the Ukrainian war they most feared, only 6% stated 'difficulties in welcoming refugees' (compared with an EU average of 7%), mentioning instead concerns regarding inflation, economic crisis, and the war spreading to more countries in Europe (European Commission 2022).

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<sup>4</sup> The data was collated using a keyword search in the Nexis UK newspaper database tailored to the most salient issues in the UK context. The keyword search included (migrants or immigration or refugees or asylum seekers) and (crossings or entry or flows) and (illegal or irregular). A total of 5205 news articles were identified in the timeframe across the three publications.



**FIGURE 6: Public Attitudes to Immigration in the UK (2008-2020)**



Source: Data extracted from the European Social Survey rounds 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10: <https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/data/>

## 2.4 Case Studies

This report focuses on narratives on migration during three events/episodes of intense political debate in the UK between 2012-2022. The first two cases were selected based on a comparative research design across the six European countries participating in the study (UK, Germany, France, Hungary, Italy and Spain). The first comparative case study relates to the EU emergency relocation mechanism proposed by the European Commission on 9 September 2015. Since the UK opted out of participating in any EU emergency resettlement schemes in early May 2015 (Travis 2015), the analysis focuses on narratives on the UK's response to the crisis, responsibilities to its European partners, and the relocation/resettlement of refugees, more generally. The second comparative case study focuses on responses to Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24<sup>th</sup> February 2022 and the ensuing refugee crisis. The third, UK specific case study focuses on narratives on 'small boat' arrivals from France, across the English Channel. The analysis concentrates on the period in the run-up to the Memorandum of Understanding between the United Kingdom and Rwanda, which was signed on 13<sup>th</sup> April 2022.

In each case, qualitative content analysis was conducted to identify the dominant narratives on migration in the media and political debate (the 'communicative' sphere as defined by Schmidt (2008)), and in policy venues (the 'coordinative' sphere). Media narratives were identified in articles published by *The Daily Mail*, *The Guardian*, and *The Times*, covering the

political spectrum of British print media (right-wing tabloid, progressive, and centrist newspapers), and mirroring the research conducted in Work Package 3. Data was gathered predominantly from editorials/comment pieces published by the newspapers, during peak periods of coverage, to capture the editorial positions on the issue. Articles were identified via the Nexis UK newspaper database.

House of Commons debates were analysed to identify political narratives. Parliamentary debates were chosen given the inclusion of politicians representing the largest parties in the UK (Conservative Party, Labour Party, Scottish National Party, Liberal Democrats), thereby facilitating analysis of variation in narratives along party-political lines, between the government and the opposition, as well as between individual cabinet members/ministries. Once again, the focus was on debates in direct response to events, usually within a three-month timeframe. Debates were identified using keyword searches on the Hansard.

Dominant narratives in policy venues were identified in policy documentation reflecting the 'coordinative' sphere. This included, for example, Home Office annual reports, immigration strategy papers, white papers or other policy documentation that explicitly refers to the three cases. These documents occasionally incorporated both a communicative and coordinative function. Nevertheless, the primary purpose of the policy documents selected was to steer policy output, and the intended audience was policy experts and stakeholders. The decision was taken not to analyse legislation, given the breadth of intervening variables between policy proposals and policy output. This data was supplemented with data gathered during six semi-structured interviews with senior Home Office officials and politicians (see Appendix 1). For more detail, including how documents were coded, refer to BRIDGES Working Papers 19 (Boswell and Smellie 2023).

## 3. Narratives in Political Debate and Policymaking

### 3.1 The European migration crisis in 2015 and the EU Relocation Scheme<sup>5</sup>

In 2015, the UK held a distinctive position concerning immigration and border policy in the EU. The UK (and Ireland) had opted out of the Schengen agreement and retained autonomous border controls. They had, however, opt-in to some border control and enforcement areas of the Schengen *acquis*, such as police and judicial cooperation. The UK also opted into provisions under the first phase of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), including the Temporary Protection Directive (Council Directive 2001/55/EC) and the initial asylum qualification, procedures, and reception conditions directives implemented between 1999-2004. The Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government declined to participate in the second phase of the CEAS (the recast asylum directives) in 2013, citing that it was not in "Britain's best interests" (Home Office 2013). Nevertheless, the UK opted into the Dublin III

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<sup>5</sup> The term crisis is in quotation marks to denote the constructed nature of the 'crisis' in 2015. As we will see, the exact nature of the crisis, in Europe, in Syria or at the UK border with France, was highly contested in British public and political debate. Moreover, the number of migrants who tried to reach the UK was comparatively low, suggesting that the situation could be interpreted as a political or policy crisis as opposed to one of people (see, for instance, Trilling 2015).

Regulation and the recast EURODAC Regulation. Moreover, whilst the UK only held observer status on the Frontex Management Board in 2015, it contributed to joint operations coordinated by Frontex to tackle irregular immigration to the EU on a case-by-case basis, such as through the deployment of HMS Bulwark in the Mediterranean.

Despite cooperation on what one interviewee referred to as 'hard-edge measures' to tackle irregular migration (UK\_I\_01), the UK did not participate in any 'responsibility-sharing'<sup>6</sup> programmes between EU Member States for the provision of asylum seekers and openly opposed the EU's proposed quota system and emergency resettlement programme in May 2015 (Travis 2015). The government's approach focused on tackling the 'root causes' of the conflict in Syria and working with UNHCR to resettle refugees from the region. By 2016, the UK was operating four resettlement schemes: Gateway, Mandate, the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement (VPR) scheme, and the Vulnerable Children's Resettlement scheme. The VPR scheme was set up in January 2014, but by June 2015, only 216 people (including dependents) had been resettled to the UK<sup>7</sup> (McGuinness 2017). Under pressure from opposition parties, Conservative backbenchers, and the public (especially after the image of the lifeless body of Aylan Kurdi on a beach in Turkey went viral), the VPR scheme was expanded, and the UK government committed to resettling 20,000 Syrian refugees during the Parliament (within 5 years). Nevertheless, the UK government retained its position not to participate in the EU emergency relocation scheme or quotas.

The extent to which the UK should support its European partners and in what capacity was central to public and political debate on the country's response to events unfolding in Europe and the wider Syrian refugee crisis in 2015-2016. A campaign led by Save the Children and Labour peer Lord Alfred Dubs called for the UK to support its European neighbours by taking in unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Lord Dubs, who came to the UK as part of the *Kindertransport* during WWII, tabled an amendment during the ping-pong stages of the Immigration Bill 2016 that committed the Home Office to resettle unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) stranded in mainland Europe to the UK. The so-called 'Dubs amendment' (Section 67) of the Immigration Act 2016 resulted in a small resettlement scheme for unaccompanied children in Europe, predominantly from Italy and Greece but also France, and represented the only relocation of refugees from Europe that the UK accepted.

### *a) Narratives in the Media*

The analysis of the dominant narratives in the British media focuses on a qualitative content analysis of twelve editorials and commentaries published in *The Times*, *The Guardian* and *The Daily Mail* between 26 August and 23 September 2015, reflecting a peak in newspaper coverage of immigration issues illustrated in Figure 5<sup>8</sup>. Since the articles were foremost

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<sup>6</sup> Frequently referred to as 'burden-sharing', this report adopts the less loaded terminology of 'responsibility-sharing' used by the EU institutions.

<sup>7</sup> According to the Home Office, nearly 6,000 Syrian nationals (and dependents) were granted asylum or other forms of leave to remain through the ordinary asylum procedure between 2011 and the year ending 31 March 2016 (Home Office 2016, 29).

<sup>8</sup> One commentary that directly addressed the EU relocation mechanism in the *Daily Mail*, titled 'Agree migrant quota or you can't send any back, threatens EU', fell outside this timeframe (published on 20 January 2016).

editorials, the narrative voice predominantly reflects that of the editorial positions of the newspapers, featuring very few direct quotes from politicians or other actors.

A recurring narrative in the *Daily Mail* was that relocating tens of thousands of migrants in Europe would act as a **'pull factor' and encourage more people to risk their lives** and their children's lives by attempting perilous journeys to reach the EU (Daily Mail, 10 September 2015). In this narrative, the EU is cast as the villain, along with the left-wing opposition parties and rights groups calling for the UK to participate in EU relocation schemes. This narrative was often accompanied by support for the British government's focus on foreign aid for the countries neighbouring Syria and resettling refugees from UN camps in the region instead of participating in EU quotas or 'burden-sharing' mechanisms. Moreover, Prime Minister David Cameron is cast as a hero for his 'sensible' policy approach. A variation of this narrative could also be found in *The Guardian* and *The Times*.

In a critical appraisal of the EU's response to the migration crisis, *The Guardian* argued that neither Germany's 'burden-sharing' through quotas scheme nor David Cameron's focus on ending the Syrian civil war would provide a solution to the refugee crisis (Guardian, 15 September 2015). Describing Germany's decision to 'open its borders' as 'morally courageous but not entirely wise', the editorial argued that the 'generous humanitarian response' acted as a 'signal' to people in the Middle East and Africa that Europe would receive them ('pull factor'). Moreover, a quota system would not necessarily work since migrants have 'critical preferences' ('agency') and are unlikely to stay in countries such as Lithuania, Poland, or Greece, irrespective of where they are sent.

*The Times* was also critical of the EU's policy proposals. One editorial argued that **safe third-country provisions would not address the influx of migrants** from the Middle East and Africa (Times, 26 August 2015). It also questioned the efficacy of quotas for relocation and resettlement since refugees will gravitate towards 'family and economic opportunity'. By September 2015, the paper's opposition to EU quotas appears to have hardened, describing the quota plan as 'misconceived' and 'half-formed policies' that will encourage more people to try to reach Europe and 'only risk more lives and cause more misery' (Times, 3 September 2015). Whilst the UK is criticised for being a 'spectator' and 'slow to respond' to the crisis, the government's strategy to resettle refugees from the region is lauded as preventing people from attempting dangerous journeys to Europe or relying on traffickers. Moreover, the newspaper called for the UK to take on a leadership role: 'Britain is a leading European nation, and the time has come to act like one' (Times, 5 September 2015).

Another narrative that appeared in the *Daily Mail* was that most migrants crossing the Mediterranean were **not 'genuine' asylum seekers but economic migrants or jihadists** (Daily Mail, 16 September 2015). It argued that German Chancellor Angela Merkel's announcement that Syrians will be treated as refugees and not sent back to the first country through which they entered the EU – the suspension of 'Dublin returns' – acted as a 'pull factor'. As a result, 'economic migrants' were pretending to be Syrians ('bogus Syrians'). Moreover, this posed a security threat since not only were trafficking gangs trading in fake Syrian passports, but ISIS jihadists were trying to slip into Europe as Syrian refugees. The 'moral' of the story was that the generosity of countries such as Germany was being exploited. In this case, the story's villains were Angela Merkel, 'economic migrants', 'bogus Syrians', 'ISIS jihadists', and 'traffickers'/trafficking gangs'. Meanwhile, the victims were 'genuine' Syrians,

presented as the only 'genuine' asylum seekers, and citizens, such as 'ordinary Berliners' (Daily Mail, 16 September 2015).

A third narrative in the *Daily Mail* was that the 'migrant crisis' in Europe and tensions over the quota scheme strengthened the UK's position in renegotiating its membership of the EU in relation to curbing immigration and strengthened the case for **Brexit**, in general (Daily Mail, 23 September 2015). With reference to the 'controversial decision' to introduce a mandatory quota system through qualified majority voting instead of consensus, it argued that immigration issues should not be 'decided in Brussels'. Once again, the European Commission was cast as the villain, whilst EU member states who opposed the quota system were cast as the victims. Despite the UK already having opted out of the scheme, quoting both Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond and a UKIP MEP, the implied solution to the 'problem' was for the UK to leave the EU.

A variation on this story in the *Daily Mail* accused the **EU of 'mafia-style blackmail'** concerning proposals to overhaul the Dublin Regulation and link 'Dublin transfers' to the refugee quota mechanism (Daily Mail, 14 May 2015; 20 January 2016). The narrative borrows heavily from existing 'master narratives' (see section 2.1), combining the notion of 'invasion' in Europe ('Europe is being overwhelmed by a tide of migrants') with the notion of a 'loss of control' of national borders to EU institutions ('It's clear we no longer have control of our borders'). Moreover, it argued that this could 'tip the contest in favour of the Leave campaign'. The story's villain is the EU, and the UK is cast as the victim.

A core narrative in *The Guardian* was that the UK would be able to help more Syrian refugees if it were part of a European '**collective common effort**' (Guardian, 4 September 2015). Despite having the same opt-out right, Ireland had announced it would take part in EU relocation schemes. Moreover, a lack of funding for local councils was preventing more refugees from being given sanctuary (Guardian, 7 September 2015). EU money could solve the problem, but the UK's refusal to take part in the relocation scheme made it more complicated to negotiate.

Another narrative relates to the 'master narrative' of the UK's historical role as a 'state of refuge' (see section 2.1). Quoting Shadow Home Secretary (and Labour leadership candidate at the time) Yvette Cooper, *The Guardian* disseminated the narrative that the UK has a '**proud history of providing refuge to those in need**' or a 'British tradition of taking in refugees' (Guardian, 1 September 2015). In a speech to the House of Commons, Cooper had proposed the UK take in 10,000 Syrian refugees in a month, referring to British efforts during the *Kindertransport* in the 1930s. *The Guardian* repeatedly highlighted how Cameron's commitment to resettle 20,000 refugees over five years fell short of the opposition party's suggestions and international expectations (EU, UN etc.).

Meanwhile, most of the coverage in *The Times* focused on straight reporting of the latest developments during the migration crisis and therefore was not presented in a narrative format. However, a handful of editorials in September 2015 addressed EU quotas and how the UK should respond, reflecting the narrative voice of the newspaper. A dominant narrative in *The Times* was critical of EU member states for not confronting the scale of the crisis or 'crafting a coherent response' (Times, 26 August 2015). The lack of consensus on quotas had divided Eastern and Western Europe, threatening the 'foundations' of the EU and leaving Europe



'powerless' (Times, 5 September 2015). The crisis called for 'calmer voices' and combined 'compassion' and 'common sense' (or 'hard-headed problem solving').

### **Narrative components**

**Characters:** In *The Guardian*, the British government was most frequently cast as the story's villain for not doing more to support refugees and its European neighbours. The Labour Party and pro-rights/pro-migration NGOs ('refugee sector') were cast as potential heroes for pressuring the government to do more, with migrants as the clear victims of the story. Coverage in *The Guardian* also included a broader range of actors, including commentary from Labour politicians, the 'refugee sector' in the UK (e.g., Oxfam, Refugee Council etc.) and European politicians (Francois Hollande, Thomas de Maizière etc.). Meanwhile, in *The Times*, the villains of the story are predominantly EU member states unable to agree on how to respond to the crisis and in particular the 'shrill and xenophobic' Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban (Times, 5 September 2015). Germany is also presented in a negative light for 'lecturing' the UK on how it should respond to the crisis despite having a very different history on immigration ('Europe's refugee crisis will not be solved by lectures from Germany'). Whereas the UK is portrayed as a hero that has not yet fulfilled its leadership potential. Migrants are the victims, although largely invisible. In the *Daily Mail*, the EU was continuously cast in a negative light, reflecting the *Daily Mail's* support for the UK's bid to leave the EU. In the *Daily Mail*, migrants are also explicitly cast as villains who pose a threat as criminals or potential terrorists ('jihadists') or are trying to cheat the system ('bogus refugees', economic migrants pretending to be Syrian etc.). Across the board, the representation of characters is moralising and consistently attributing blame or responsibility, suggesting a decidedly 'lay' narrative style.

**Setting:** Whilst the issue-specific settings of these narratives varied, stories in the *Daily Mail* were consistently set within the context of 'growing tensions' between the UK and the EU, as Prime Minister David Cameron attempted to renegotiate the UK's membership terms of the EU ahead of the in-out referendum in June 2016. In most cases, the setting of the narratives in *The Guardian* and *The Times* spanned both domestic and European levels, with a broader perspective and more policy detail than the *Daily Mail*. However, in all cases, the focus was on the immediacy of the crisis, with vivid imagery of the plight of refugees suffering reflected in a 'lay' narrative style.

**Plot:** The plots of the narratives varied without a discernible pattern: from the *Daily Mail* presenting Merkel's 'we can do it' ("wir schaffen das") statement as a 'conspiracy' that acted as a 'pull factor'; to 'change is only an illusion' underpinning *The Times'* argument that EU policy proposals will not address the crisis; and, calls to action in *The Guardian* and *The Times* supported by narratives of 'decline', whereby the situation will only get worse unless more is done. In all cases, the plots are dramatic and present a clear cause and effect to support the proposed policy solution/criticism of approaches reflecting our definition of a 'lay' narrative plot.

**Moral/policy solutions:** Both the *Daily Mail* and *The Times* strongly disseminated the narrative that the EU relocation scheme would act as a 'pull factor' and encourage migrants to risk dangerous journeys to get to the EU. They expressed support for the government's policy approach of focusing on humanitarian aid and the resettlement of refugees from the region. Commentary in *The Guardian* was most explicitly critical of the government's response to the crisis, reflecting its political orientation as a left-leaning progressive newspaper. It strongly

advocated for the UK to work with its European partners to find a common solution to the crisis. Both *The Times* and *The Guardian* called on the government to do more but were often ambiguous on alternative policy approaches. *The Times* launched an appeal to support refugees calling on the government to do more (Times, 3 September 2015; 7 September 2015). Whilst commentary on the crisis, especially in *The Times* and *The Guardian*, included detailed references to policy, proposed solutions focus on the immediacy of the crisis (emergency-driven as opposed to long-term policy solutions) and rarely acknowledge any impediments or counterarguments, suggesting a 'lay' narrative style.

### *b) Narratives in Political Debate*

Four debates in Parliament during the peak of the 'crisis' were analysed to identify the dominant narratives on the EU relocation scheme and the migration crisis in political debate. Prime Minister David Cameron made a statement on 'Syria: Refugees and Counter-terrorism' on 7 September 2015, after which he was questioned by MPs. The following day an emergency debate on the 'refugee crisis in Europe' was held in response to the public petition: 'Accept more asylum seekers and increase support for refugee migrants in the UK'<sup>9</sup> (UK Parliament n.d.). There was a further 'opposition day' debate on 9 September on the 'humanitarian crisis in the Mediterranean and Europe'. In addition to these three debates that were held during the height of public salience on immigration issues in 2015, the fourth and final debate analysed was on the opt-in or opt-out decision on 'Relocation of Migrants in Need of International Protection' held on 14 December 2015.

Across all four debates, divergence in narratives on EU relocation fell along party-political lines. The dominant narrative espoused by the government was that **relocating asylum seekers and refugees from within the EU would act as a 'pull factor'** and encourage people to make dangerous journeys to reach the EU and the UK. In this narrative, the EU is cast as the villain, along with the economically strong member states (e.g. Germany) 'bullying' smaller (eastern) member states into mandatory quotas. The government's decision not to opt into a crisis relocation mechanism for the benefit of Italy, Greece and Hungary was fully supported by Conservative MPs, with Conservative backbenchers suggesting there was a "lack of democracy that lies at the heart of this proposal" (HC, 14 December 2015).

The government's position was accompanied by several related narratives disseminated by Prime Minister David Cameron and members of his cabinet. Firstly, directly referring to the national myth of a tradition of humanitarianism, **Britain was fulfilling its moral responsibility to help refugees**, just as it has so proudly throughout history, by resettling the most vulnerable people from UN refugee camps in the region and providing a five-year humanitarian visa. During Cameron's announcement of the government's commitment to resettle 20,000 Syrians, he argued that resettling refugees from Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon provided a more direct and safer route to the UK rather than risking the hazardous journey to Europe. Since the UK was not part of Schengen, there was no obligation to participate in responsibility-sharing measures. As the title of the first debate suggests, the government linked the issues of Syrian refugees, border controls and reducing the threat of terrorism. Thus, the narrative suggested

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<sup>9</sup> Emergency debates in the House of Commons are held in response to public petitions that received more than 100,000 signatures. This petition received 450,287 signatories in the six months it was open.

that resettling refugees screened by the UNHCR significantly **reduced the risk of potential terrorists entering the country** or economic migrants in search of a better life in Europe.

Another narrative disseminated by the government described the **UK as a world leader in humanitarian aid**. Cameron stated that “Britain has a major role to play in terms of this conflict because we are the second biggest funder of these refugee camps, and we are the biggest donor of aid to many of these countries” (HC 7 September 2015); while Secretary of State for International Development, Justine Greening, stated, “we should all be proud of the UK’s work in leading this effort” during the Opposition Day debate on 9 September. To support this narrative, frequent reference is made to the UK meeting the UN target of spending 0.7% of GDI on aid and the UK being the second largest bilateral aid donor to Syria (exceeded only by the United States). In this narrative, other EU member states are also cast as villains since they are not spending as much as the UK, which is spending “more than Germany, more than France and many times more than most other major European countries”. Finally, aid was providing food, water and education, thereby **tackling the root causes of migratory movement** to the EU. The assumption is that refugees want to remain close to home to return once the situation has improved. This approach is repeatedly referred to as acting “with our head and our heart”, implying it is the only ‘sensible’ approach.

Leader of the Labour Party Harriet Harman accused the government of being inward-looking, stating that the UK had a moral obligation to help refugees irrespective of efforts to end the war in Syria (HC 7 September 2015). It was not a choice between tackling the crisis in Syria and provision for asylum seekers in the UK; refugees have made a considerable contribution to the country, and the **UK should welcome more** people fleeing persecution, **including refugees from southern Europe**. In contrast to representatives of the government, Yvette Cooper, Labour’s Shadow Home Secretary, consistently refers to a ‘refugee crisis in Europe’ as opposed to a ‘migrant crisis’, supporting a humanitarian framing of the situation.

In the more policy-orientated debate on 14 December, Keir Starmer, Labour’s Shadow Minister for Immigration, expressed support for the government’s decision not to opt-in to mandatory quotas but stated that the UK should do more to support European partners and should **relocate refugees from countries in Europe** experiencing high migratory pressures on a voluntary basis. Starmer argued that the UK should play an “active role in tackling the migration crisis across the EU”, stating that the UK has “a moral responsibility to work with other EU states to help to deal with the large numbers of refugees”, concluding that the UK “has a proud history of offering sanctuary to those in need of refuge and should not shrink from its responsibilities because it has the fortune not to be on the frontline of the crisis” (HC, 14 December 2015). He also questioned the government’s interpretation of the principle of solidarity and fair sharing of responsibility in the EU if the UK did not support its neighbours. The Labour Party also explicitly refuted the government’s narrative that relocation from within the EU acted as a “pull factor”, arguing that the government had not provided any evidence that supported this narrative.

Other opposition parties adopted a similar narrative. Angus Robertson, Leader of the Scottish National Party (SNP) in the House of Commons, argued that the UK government should work together with its European partners to accept a share of the refugees who were already in Europe. Moreover, the narrative of ‘jihadists’ coming to Europe via mixed migration flows - with a reference to the terrorist attack in Paris - was strongly refuted by SNP MPs (HC, 14



December 2015). Meanwhile, the Liberal Democrats MP, and former Scotland Minister under the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government, Alistair Carmichael, proposed working more closely with the UK's European partners and stated that the British public was looking for a bi-partisan response to the migration crisis (HC, 7 September 2015).

### **Narrative components**

**Characters:** There appeared to be agreement across parties on who the victims of the crisis were, namely Syrian refugees fleeing the conflict and tyranny. The government tended to emphasise that they were supporting the most vulnerable refugees. Meanwhile, opposition parties also regarded European countries experiencing a high influx of migrants as victims. The predominant villains in government narratives were smuggling/tracking gangs, terrorists (in Syria and abroad), and, less explicitly, any economic migrants taking advantage of the crisis to enter Europe or the UK. The opposition also cast the UK government as a 'villain' for not demonstrating more solidarity with refugees and its European partners. Somewhat intuitively, the UK (for leading on humanitarian aid and resettlement) and the British public (for its generosity of spirit) were the heroes of the government's narratives, whereas the opposition cast a wider net, including European neighbours taking in high numbers of asylum seekers and NGOs as heroes.

**Setting:** The political debate featured a distinct geographical bifurcation in the settings of the 'crisis' (Syria versus Europe), which clearly illustrates a variation in the 'problem definition' between the government and the opposition. Whilst the government focused on foreign policy and aid interventions in Syria (and resettlement of refugees from the region), the opposition tended to focus on aspects of the crisis in Europe. Some variation in the presentation of (policy) settings between the debates could also be observed. For example, the three debates in September focused on interpretations of the crisis (cause and effect). Whereas the debate specifically on relocation in December 2015 made far more references to policy and institutional settings. For example, the Chairman of the European Scrutiny Committee, Conservative Member of Parliament (MP), Sir William Cash, referred to meetings in Brussels and Luxembourg and the Conference of Parliamentary Committees for Union Affairs of Parliaments of the European Union (COSAC). This suggests a slightly more technocratic style in the later debate.

**Plot:** We can observe a clear difference in plots between the government and the opposition. The government predominantly invoked stories of 'progress' and 'control', whereby the situation was being brought under control by the government's policy interventions. Only when critiquing the EU's relocation scheme does the narrative more closely reflect the 'change is just an illusion' plot, whereby it is argued that the proposed EU response will not address the causes of the crisis and will, in fact, encourage more people to make dangerous journeys to Europe. In the first three debates, the narratives were highly personalised and focused on cause and effect. During the emergency and opposition day debates, in particular, narratives focused on detailing the human suffering caused by the crisis, such as drownings in the Mediterranean and people suffocating in lorries, reflecting a 'lay' narrative style.

**Moral/policy solutions:** Variations in proposed policy solutions clearly reflect ideological cleavages and predominantly focus on the extent to which the UK should support its European neighbours. All parties agreed on the allocation of humanitarian aid, tackling smuggling/trafficking gangs, the Navy's involvement in search and rescue operations in the

Mediterranean, and resettlement from UN camps and the countries bordering Syria. However, we can observe a clear differentiation in the UK's involvement in EU responsibility-sharing measures, with the government stating that it will not participate in the emergency relocation scheme and quotas, whilst the opposition calls for a pan-European response to the crisis and the resettlement of refugees from mainland Europe on a voluntary and case-by-case basis. In both cases, arguments are couched in moralistic language, metaphors, imagery, and historical narratives with little acknowledgement of any possible impediments, suggesting a 'lay' narrative style.

### *c) Relationship between Media and Political Narratives ('Communicative' Sphere)*

Considerable similarities between narratives in the media and in political debate can be identified. The dominant narrative on the EU relocation scheme disseminated by the government, namely that the mechanism will act as a 'pull factor', was **mirrored** in both the media and political debate. This is particularly evident in the *Daily Mail*, reflecting the political affiliation of the paper, but also in *The Times*. *The Times* supported the British government's position that the promise of residence and work in Europe for successful asylum applicants would act as a 'pull factor' and the focus should be on 'curbing migration at its source rather than encouraging it in Europe' (Times, 26 August 2015). Meanwhile, *The Guardian*, more closely reflected the narratives invoked by the Labour opposition's critique of the government, even directly quoting Shadow Home Secretary Yvette Copper in the emergency debate on 8 September calling for the government to welcome 10,000 Syrian refugees at once like the UK did during the *Kindertransport*. This suggests that the political affiliation of the newspapers played a role in the narratives they disseminate.

The dominant narratives in the media could be found in political debate and vice versa, with very little adaptation and no apparent or obvious omissions of a dominant narrative. The only slight divergence could be observed in that the UK's leadership in humanitarian aid did not feature as prominently in media coverage as it did in the government's statements in Parliament. Conversely, Brexit did not feature as prominently in the political debate on the migration crisis as it did in the *Daily Mail* coverage. Nevertheless, a Conservative backbencher explicitly refuted the narrative that leaving the EU would solve the crisis because the UK would have control of its borders, suggesting that the narrative observed in the *Daily Mail* also permeated political debate (to a limited degree). However, in this instance, the narrative disseminated by the tabloid newspaper was **rejected** by a Conservative MP from the 'remain' camp.

A statement made by Yvette Cooper during the emergency debate on 8 September suggests that narratives in the media, media appeals and perceptions of public opinion presented in the media played a significant role in the political debate at the time. Referring to the Prime Minister's statement on the government's commitment to resettle 20,000 Syrian refugees, Cooper stated:

"I pay tribute to all those who, in the past seven days, have signed petitions and contacted MPs, charities and newspapers to speak out and call for action. That has changed the Government's mind, which is welcome." (HC, 8 September 2015)

Finally, the analysis of narrative components supports the premise that narratives in the communicative sphere (both in the media and political debate) are predominantly 'lay' in style, with a slightly more technocratic style only observed in the more policy-driven debate on the relocation mechanism on 14 December 2015. This debate was requested by the Chair of the EU Scrutiny Committee, the select committee responsible for assessing the legal and/or political importance of EU documents, which goes some way to explain the variation in the style of narratives invoked during this debate.

#### *d) Narratives in Policymaking ('Coordinative' Sphere)*

The analysis of migration narratives in the coordinative sphere relies on data gathered from policy documentation that explicitly refers to the UK's roles and responsibilities during the so-called migration crisis. The first is the *Home Office Annual Report and Accounts 2015-16*. This document is a corporate report and review of the Home Office's policy goals and priorities, published on 31 March 2016. It includes a performance review and foreword by the most senior Home Office official, the Permanent Secretary. The intended audience is internal officials, policy experts and stakeholders responsible for the coordination and delivery of policy programmes. Therefore, it sits firmly within the coordinative sphere of policymaking.

The second document is titled *Migration Crisis: Government Response to the Home Affairs Committee's Seventh Report*. The Home Affairs Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to scrutinise the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Home Office. This can take the form of inquiries into policy issues as they arise. Following an inquiry into the government's handling of the migration crisis in 2015/16, the select committee published a 77-page report on 3 August 2016 (Home Affairs Committee 2016). The document analysed here was published by the government in response to this report, with the purpose of informing and persuading the experts in the committee that the challenges set out in the report were being met. The government's response to 30 paragraphs in the original report was not published until 21 February 2017. However, it was selected for analysis given the relevance for this case study. Whilst this document played a 'communicative' function for the government, it was drafted by officials and directed at an expert policy audience and, therefore, sits comfortably within our definition of the coordinative sphere.

Finally, I analyse transcripts of oral evidence given to the Home Affairs Committee's inquiry on the migration crisis by members of the government and Home Office officials. This includes evidence given by James Brokenshire MP, Minister for Immigration, and Sir Charles Montgomery, Director General, Border Force, on Tuesday, 8 September 2015, and by Richard Harrington MP, Minister with responsibility for Syrian Refugees, on Tuesday, 13 October 2015. As we argue elsewhere, committees tasked with scrutinising government performance and legislation, especially where these are relatively sequestered from the communicative sphere, provide a useful site for analysing coordinative discourses (Boswell and Smellie 2023, 11). Moreover, the temporal proximity of the Home Affairs Committee's evidence sessions to the announcement of the European Commission's proposed relocation scheme (9 September 2015) and the peak in public salience of migration issues (see Figure 4) make these transcripts potentially relevant sources of data on narratives in policymaking at the time. The analysis is further supported by information gathered during interviews with senior Home Office officials (see Appendix 1).

Two dominant groups of narratives can be observed in policy documents on the migration crisis. Narratives on border security and control related to Calais, on the one hand, and narratives on asylum and refugees, with reference to the Syrian refugee crisis, on the other. Intriguingly, the two divergent interpretations of the 'crisis' at hand (or 'problem definition') are rarely addressed together and, as we will see, seldom appear in the same section/under the same heading. Moreover, the EU relocation scheme or European migration crisis is rarely referenced, suggesting that once the government had stated that it would not be opting into any EU relocation mechanisms, policymakers no longer considered it part of their remit.

The highly securitised frame of the role of the Home Office is immediately apparent upon analysing the annual review. According to the Permanent Secretary's foreword, the Home Office's goal is to "keep our citizens safe and our country secure...control immigration, protect the vulnerable and respond effectively to crises" (Home Office 2016, 4–5). The overwhelming focus is on immigration control, reducing net migration and enhancing border security, with significant issue linkage between border controls and reducing the threat of terrorism. For example, terrorism from abroad threatens British communities facing the "harmful social consequences of all forms of extremism" and the proposed policy solution is strengthening external border controls.

The so-called European migration 'crisis' is only explicitly referred to in a section on refugees and asylum. However, a section is dedicated to enhancing border security at the juxtaposed borders and ports in Northern France with reference to the UK/France Joint Declaration on enhancing tunnel security, policing cooperation and managing migrants in the migrant camps, agreed between the Home Secretary and the French Interior Minister on 20 August 2015. When the crisis is mentioned, it is referred to as the Syrian crisis, not as a migration or refugee crisis and is not mentioned in relation to the European context, with only a single passing reference to an 'increase in migratory flows across Europe' in the 165-page document (Home Office 2016, 61). This distinction in settings suggests a foreign policy frame of the migration crisis as opposed to a European or domestic policy issue.

This did not apply to the government's response to the Home Affairs Committee's report, which was on the migration crisis and explicitly refers to the UK government's decision-making regarding EU initiatives. This document contained the most narrative elements of the policy documents analysed. Narratives emerged in statements on what was considered the "appropriate" response or policy approach to a situation or crisis.

A central narrative in this document was that the relocation of asylum seekers or refugees from within the EU will act as a **'pull factor' and encourage people to make hazardous journeys** into and across Europe. By resettling Syrian refugees from the region, the government was providing refugees with a more direct and safe route to the UK (Home Affairs Committee 2017, 12). Intriguingly, this narrative appears to have been accepted by all policy experts in the select committee, illustrated by the following excerpt from the Home Affairs Committee's original report:

"The Government has said that it will not take part in the current EU schemes to relocate or resettle refugees. This is because it does not wish to participate in any initiative that might act as a magnet for those seeking refuge and thereby encourage them to risk taking dangerous routes to try to reach the UK. We accept this approach." (Home Affairs Committee 2016, para. 65)

Moreover, those who needed international protection should apply in the **first safe country** they reached, as it was the fastest route to safety. Encouraging refugees to claim asylum in the first safe country, Home Office officials argued, meant that vulnerable people would receive help more quickly rather than risking their lives on dangerous journeys or falling victim to criminal/trafficking gangs exploiting the situation (Home Affairs Committee 2017, 12). This was supported by the interview data, with one interviewee confirming that the whole approach was to “stop them coming into the EU, stop them coming into the UK. Once they're here, it's every man for himself, basically.” (UK\_I\_01).

Finally, the transcripts of evidence given to the Home Affairs select committee consisted predominantly of the exchange of information on policy decisions, and immigration rules, detailed discussions of specific incidents, focusing on operational aspects and issues, work strands underway, and reporting on figures, featuring comparatively few narrative components. This reflects our expectations regarding the more technocratic and dry style of communication in the coordinative sphere.

### **Narrative components**

**Characters:** The main victims in policy documents were vulnerable individuals and refugees in the UNHCR-run camps in the region. A differentiation is made between those in need of humanitarian aid and protection and those seeking a better life, mirroring the master narrative that juxtaposes economic migrants and ‘genuine’ asylum seekers. A gendered dimension can be observed in the representation of the ‘victims’ and those in the ‘greatest need’ of protection. For instance, the Syrian VPR scheme not only focuses on those in need of “medical treatment, survivors of violence and torture” but also on “women and children at risk” (Home Affairs Committee 2017, 12). Except for ‘terrorists’ and criminal gangs exploiting the crisis, narratives in policy documents tend to omit an explicit ‘villain’. However, the occasional implicit ‘villain’ of the story is migrants themselves, including those who enter the country irregularly (referred to as ‘clandestine arrivals’), those who abuse EU free movement or ‘the system’, and those who try to reach the UK through France. The heroes are overwhelmingly depicted as the UK (Home Office or the government) and the UNHCR in its capacity as the UK’s leading partner for the resettlement programmes. There are also many additional partners mentioned in a positive light for the effective delivery of policy, including local authorities, the Local Government Association, Citizens UK and other charities and NGOs engaged in ‘strategic migration partnerships’ with the Home Office and related departments.

**Setting:** As mentioned, a geographical bifurcation of the setting of the ‘crisis’ can be observed: northern France, on the one hand, and Syria and the region, on the other, with very little reference to the wider European context. Policy settings tend to be broad and long-term policy horizons covering all aspects of the Home Office’s remit. For example, ‘Control Immigration’, including ‘reduce annual net migration’, covering all legal categories; ‘Clamp down on illegal migration’, covering both irregular entry and stay under the 2014 and 2016 Immigration Acts, ‘Enhance Border Security’ covering Border Force, technology, the Authority to Carry (ATC) Scheme, the Common Travel Area and migration diplomacy with France, ‘Refugees and Asylum’, and so on. In this instance, the narrative setting is distinctly ‘technocratic’ in style.

**Plot:** Narrative plots in policy documents tended to feature storylines of ‘progress’ and ‘control’ whereby a ‘bad situation’, which was thought to be out of control, can be brought into control through the proposed policy intervention/the adopted approach. Alternatively, some of the



more technocratic narratives in the policy analysis that referred to external shocks were stories of 'stymied progress', whereby an effective policy practice had been disrupted and reassessed/adapted. For example, a 436% increase in irregular arrivals through the Eurotunnel, compared with the previous year, due to vulnerabilities of the Eurotunnel freight transport route into Folkestone, rendered Kent County Council's asylum intake unit unable to place unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in appropriate accommodation or care. This resulted in the initiation of a critical incident and the national dispersal system to find other councils that could offer support (Home Office 2016, 58).

**Moral/policy solutions:** Similar to settings, policy solutions are broad and cover all aspects of the Home Office's policy remit. However, in the most 'narratively' driven parts of the text focusing on the Syrian refugee crisis or developments in Europe, policy solutions include a 'comprehensive approach' that prioritises humanitarian aid and Resettlement. This is described as seeking an end to the conflict in Syria, which will have the most significant impact on refugees who remain in the region and their host countries, and the resettlement of the most vulnerable refugees from the region, specifically the most vulnerable children from the region and Europe to the UK. The latter refers to the limited resettlement of UASC from mainland Europe under the 'Dubs amendment. More generally, the narratives are embedded in significant discussion on feasibility, implementation, and enforcement issues, such as accommodation, suggesting a technocratic style.

#### *e) Circulation of Narratives in the 'Communicative' and 'Coordinative' Spheres*

No instances were observed of narratives being critiqued or explicitly **rejected** in the coordinative sphere. This is not unexpected given the function and intended audience of the documents. Moreover, narratives linking immigration and Brexit are largely **ignored** in the documents. The only exceptions include a comment in the Permanent Secretary's foreword referring to 'tackling the abuse of EU free movement' as a central topic in the Brexit negotiations and a reference to both the French and British governments having ruled out any renegotiation of the Le Touquet treaty if the UK leaves the EU, in the Home Affairs document.

Narratives on the UK's role as a world leader in humanitarian aid were also not as central in documents produced by the Home Office since aid fell under the remit of the Department for International Development (DFID)<sup>10</sup> at the time. However, the government's response to the Home Affairs committee **mirrored** the narrative in political debate, stating that the UK would be more than doubling its support in response to the Syrian crisis from £1.12 billion to over £2.3 billion, "our largest ever humanitarian response to a single crisis" (Home Affairs Committee 2017, 9). Conversely, one of the central issues for policymakers, according to the interviews conducted, namely the provision of accommodation for resettled refugees and asylum seekers, and who was covering the costs, was not a central focus in political debate nor prominently featured in the media.

What is less intuitive is that no clear examples of **adaptation** could be identified. The analysis of narrative components suggests that, in this case, we can identify a distinct variation in narrative style, especially regarding the broadening of narrative settings to include significantly more policy detail and breadth of policy solutions to cover the Home Office's remit, reflecting a more technocratic style. However, the **core narratives remained the same**, including the

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<sup>10</sup> The Department for International Development was closed in 2020 and replaced by the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO).

narrative that relocation from within the EU would act as a “pull factor” and the focus on aid and resettlement as the best policy solutions. This suggests that narratives in the communicative sphere have a significant impact on how policies are framed, and how policy approaches are developed.

#### *f) Concluding remarks*

In political debate, we saw distinct variations in dominant narratives along party political lines. If we break the narratives down into their constituent parts, this was most apparent with regard to the ‘moral of the story’ or proposed policy solution to the crisis. Whilst all political parties were more or less in agreement that the UK should not opt into an EU relocation scheme, the opposition parties, especially the Labour Party and the SNP, supported participation in the relocation of refugees from Greece and Italy on a voluntary basis. The Labour Party also explicitly rejected the government’s narrative that doing so would act as a ‘pull factor’ and encourage people to risk dangerous journeys to reach the EU.

However, narratives across the media and political arenas were very similar both in style and content. Narratives appeared to follow ideological cleavages both in the media and in political debate. Moreover, instances were identified that demonstrated the interaction between media narratives and political debate, with examples of the press directly quoting a politician to support its editorial stance and MPs appearing to respond to a dominant narrative in the media. Notably, narratives in both the media and political debate were heavily imbued with features of the master narratives identified in section 2.1.

The dominant narratives in the communicative sphere were, in this case, largely mirrored in the coordinative sphere, with divergences identified in narrative style but not necessarily in narrative content. However, as determined, the dominant narratives in the communicative sphere were permeated with ideas set out in the master narratives. This suggests that event-specific narratives in both spheres borrow heavily from existing ideas on how the UK should respond to a perceived increase in migration.

### **3.2 The Ukrainian Refugee Crisis in 2022**

A key contextual difference from the previous case study is that the UK had officially left the EU when Russia launched its military invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. Consequently, the UK was no longer party to any aspects of the Common European Asylum System, Dublin Regulation, or the decision to trigger the Temporary Protection Directive (Council Directive 2001/55/EC) on 4 March 2022 for those fleeing Ukraine. Nevertheless, an intense public and political debate took place on how the UK should respond to the estimated 14.6 million people displaced by the war and those seeking protection in the UK. Moreover, following a period of low political salience, immigration was climbing up the agenda once more (see Figure 4.)

The British government set up three programmes in response to the Ukrainian refugee crisis. As Ukrainians were not legally recognised as refugees but as displaced people, these were visa schemes through which those fleeing Ukraine could legally enter the UK. Two programmes were launched in March 2022. First, the Ukraine Family Scheme was introduced,

allowing immediate or extended family members of UK nationals or those settled in the UK to come to the country for up to three years, with access to public services. This was followed by the Homes for Ukraine scheme, which was a sponsorship scheme that enabled Ukrainian nationals and their families to come to the UK if they had a named sponsor (community or individual citizen) willing to provide accommodation and support for 6 months. The Ukraine Extension Scheme was launched on 3 May 2022, which gave Ukrainians already in the UK permission to extend their leave to remain for up to three years and provided full recourse to work, study, and public funds and services.

The British government appointed a new Minister of State for Refugees, Richard Harrington, jointly at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) and the Home Office, between 8 March 2022 and 6 September 2022, with a ministerial portfolio to co-ordinate the UK's response to the humanitarian crisis caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. He was supported by a temporarily appointed Second Permanent Secretary to lead the cross-government taskforce. As of 28 March 2023, 224,000 visas had been issued; 67,200 under the Ukraine Family Scheme and 156,800 under the Homes for Ukraine Scheme (Home Office 2023a). A further 24,500 Ukrainians had been granted permission to remain in the UK.

### *a) Narratives in the Media*

The analysis of narratives in the British press focuses on articles in *The Times*, *The Guardian* and *The Daily Mail*, published between 24 February and 31 March 2022, illustrating the immediate response to the invasion. As the analysis focuses on editorials, the narrators were once again predominantly the newspapers, with very few direct quotes from other actors.

A central narrative in the coverage of the Ukrainian refugee crisis was closely related to the master narrative on **Britain's historical tradition of offering refuge to those fleeing persecution**. *The Times* claimed the UK was not living up to its tradition and criticised the government's "boast" that the UK was a safe "haven for the persecuted", stating that "the latest examples are hardly encouraging. Thousands of Afghan refugees...are still awaiting proper settlement" (Times, 28 February 2022). *The Daily Mail* supported the UK government's response to the invasion, describing Prime Minister Boris Johnson as "leading from the front" and heralding his success in "shaming EU foot-draggers" into stepping up support for Ukraine (Daily Mail, 28 February 2022). However, it was more critical of the UK's response to Ukrainian refugees, describing Home Secretary Priti Patel's handling of the crisis as 'inept'. Moreover, the newspaper claimed that the UK's "hard-earned reputation" was being undermined by "red tape" and mismanagement by the Home Office.

Meanwhile, *The Guardian* argued that the Ukrainian refugee crisis highlighted the **inhumanity of the UK's asylum system**, stating that "Ukrainians are the latest victims of its cruelty" (Guardian, 9 March 2022). The newspaper accused ministers of treating refugees as a "political problem rather than as vulnerable human beings", reflecting an asylum system that was "geared not to supporting the traumatised, but to rejecting those who come in search of help" (Guardian, 31 March 2022). Moreover, the government had **closed off safe routes into the UK and was trying to criminalise irregular entry** under the Nationalities and Borders Bill. An article in *The Times* adopted a similar stance, stating that the government's approach "shamed" Britain and who is offered protection should be "informed by basic humanity" (Times, 8 March 2022).



In another dominant event-specific narrative, the government's policy approach was described as creating bureaucratic obstacles and significant delays to people trying to reach the UK. Quoting the Shadow Home Secretary, *The Guardian* stated that granting visas was proving painfully slow due to "**Kafkaesque bureaucracy**" (Guardian, 9 March 2022). This narrative appeared in all newspapers. The government's visa programmes were described as "grudging", "inefficient", "overly bureaucratic", and "designed to keep people out". The *Daily Mail* highlighted that family members of people on work or short-term visas could not apply to any of the schemes (Daily Mail, 11 March 2022), while *The Times* argued that "bureaucracy is no response to suffering" (Times, 28 February 2022). All newspapers called for visa requirements to be waived and an open approach adopted. The heroes of this narrative were often presented as the British public. The generosity of "households across the UK [who] have shown that they are willing to open their hearts to desperate Ukrainians" was juxtaposed with the behaviour of the government, which was described as "mean", "cruel", "chaotic" and "pandering" to hostile attitudes on immigration.

Despite an apparent consensus on waiving visa requirements and reducing bureaucratic obstacles, variations can be observed in the newspapers' coverage. For instance, the *Daily Mail* explicitly referred to the retention of security checks before welcoming people into the UK to "weed out those seeking to scam the system as well as **criminals or terrorists**" and ensure they are "genuine refugees" (Daily Mail, 10 March 2022). The ambiguity and inconsistency in the newspaper's discourse reflects the securitised frame more commonly associated with the tabloid's position on immigration, which builds on notions of migrants taking advantage of the UK's system, migrants as criminals, and the false 'genuine'/'bogus' refugee dichotomy (see section 2.1).

Another narrative which only appeared in *The Times* and the *Daily Mail* stated that the only "sensible" policy response was to **shelter refugees in the region of origin** so that they could easily return home. This echoed narratives during the Syrian refugee crisis that framed the crisis as a foreign policy issue best resolved through humanitarian aid and support in the region. Whereas, *The Guardian* invoked a **critical race narrative**, claiming that the UK's incompetence was so visible because of an increase in "public sympathy for white Europeans fleeing their homes" compared with previous refugee crises, invoking a hierarchy of asylum seekers (Guardian, 9 March 2022). Meanwhile, *The Times* also invoked a **labour market narrative**, stating that since the UK was suffering from labour shortages caused by Brexit, there was no reason not to welcome more Ukrainians (Times, 5 March 2022).

Finally, a common theme across all newspapers was that the government had miscalculated **public sentiment** on the Ukrainian crisis. According to *The Guardian*, the government needed to be "strong-armed" into broadening its restrictive definition of "close relatives" under the Ukraine Family Scheme and to have its "arm twisted" to introduce the Homes for Ukraine scheme (Guardian, 9 March 2022, 31 March 2022). The government was described as 'out of step' with the British public and its European neighbours, with even the most stringent anti-immigration countries, such as Poland, offering unrestricted sanctuary to those fleeing Ukraine.

### **Narrative components**

**Characters:** The **villain** in coverage was overwhelmingly Russian President Putin. He was described as "deranged", "the killer president", a "tyrant", and an "immoral dictator". The secondary villains, predominantly in *The Guardian*, but also in *The Times* and *Daily Mail*,

included the British government and Prime Minister Boris Johnson for failing to live up to expectations; Home Secretary Priti Patel for refusing to abandon visa restrictions; and, Immigration Minister, Kevin Foster, who was repeatedly condemned for stating that Ukrainians could come to the UK under the seasonal worker's programme, "to pick fruit" (Guardian, 28 February 2022).

Ukrainians fleeing the invasion were overwhelmingly the **victims** of the story. Intriguingly, and in contrast to 2015, all newspapers referred to those displaced by the war as 'refugees'. Ukrainians were also often described as the story's **heroes** for "taking up arms to defend their cherished liberties" (Daily Mail, 28 February 2022). The British were also heralded for "spearheading the delivery of military and humanitarian aid" (Daily Mail, 10 March 2022) and opening their homes to strangers under the Homes for Ukraine programme. *The Guardian* and *The Times* also referred to EU member states' generosity in offering protection. Poland, in particular, was "saving the continent's skin" through its humanitarian initiative (Times, 8 March 2022).

All three newspapers disseminated a distinct **gendered dimension** to the framing of both heroes and victims in their coverage on Ukraine. The protagonists of the story were described as a "heart-breaking human tide" of "women, children, the elderly and infirm" who had been "wrenched from their menfolk", who were staying behind to "fight the Russian invaders" (Daily Mail, 28 February 2022). Similarly, *The Guardian* depicted "women and children forced to leave husbands and fathers behind to an uncertain fate" (Guardian, 28 February 2022). Meanwhile, *The Times* stated that it was "overwhelmingly women, children and old people who are seeking safety...husbands, fathers and all able-bodied men up to the age of 60 have been conscripted into the improvised resistance and forbidden to leave" (Times, 28 February 2022). Overall, the representation of characters in all three newspapers was distinctly 'lay' in style, focusing on the plight of victims and allocating blame to the villain.

**Setting:** The setting of the narratives tends to focus on the humanitarian catastrophe engulfing Ukraine, describing the harrowing scenes redolent of World War II through emotive language. The urgency of the situation is highlighted both physically since asylum seekers were stuck in bitterly cold winter conditions along the Polish border and also morally speaking. From a policy perspective, both domestic and international settings are referenced. At the domestic level, the focus is on the UK's responsivity. Moreover, critiquing government policy, references are made to the Nationality and Borders Bill, which was going through Parliament at the time, and would criminalise asylum seekers entering the UK irregularly. At the European level, references are made to the EU triggering the Temporary Protection Directive. Despite referring to legislation and policy developments, extremely emotive language invoked vivid imagery of the crisis, constituting a predominantly 'lay' narrative style.

**The plot** in all articles can best be characterised as 'stories of decline' that focus on the worsening situation (Stone 2002, 138). The UK government was 'failing' to fulfil its international responsibilities, to meet its goals or the challenges of the crisis. The articles also highlighted the worsening plight of those fleeing Ukraine, either within the country or in their attempts to reach 'safe countries', including the UK. The declining situation was frequently contrasted with how the UK had welcomed the Huguenots, children during the *Kindertransport*, Ugandan-Asian refugees fleeing Idi Amin, Bosnian refugees, and Afghans fleeing the Taliban. Comparisons were most frequently drawn with Europe during World War II. This use of

historical analogy served to emphasise the severity and urgency of the Ukrainian crisis and represents a distinctly emotive and 'lay' narrative style.

**Moral/policy solution:** Coverage in all newspapers called for the government to uphold the British tradition of welcoming refugees and to make it easier for Ukrainians to reach the UK by cutting the 'red-tape' and scrapping visa restrictions. The *Daily Mail* called for the expansion of the family reunion route to include those on work or short-term visas. *The Guardian* called for greater cooperation with European neighbours and for the UK to follow the EU's example by implementing a "European-style open-door policy on Ukrainian refugees" (Guardian, 28 February 2022). It also proposed a humane and efficient asylum system instead of treating refugees as a threat and criminalising irregular entry under the Nationality and Borders Bill. Meanwhile, *The Times* emphasised that the "sensible" policy approach was to shelter refugees as close to their country as possible and called for greater support for Poland. It also proposed welcoming Ukrainians to fill labour market shortages and to fulfil the UK's Refugee Convention commitments. In contrast to the previous three narrative components, alternative approaches to the government's response to the crisis were set out in detail and with direct reference to specific policies, legislation, examples and challenges, suggesting a slightly more 'technocratic' style when it came to proposed policy solutions.

### *b) Narratives in Political Debate*

Five parliamentary debates were selected to analyse narratives in political debate. They took place in the House of Commons between 1 and 31 March 2022 in direct response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The first debate analysed was held on 1 March, and whilst it did not focus on Ukrainian refugees, it opened with a statement from Home Secretary Priti Patel and was the first debate that addressed the UK's response to those fleeing Ukraine at length. The subsequent four debates selected focused on refugees from Ukraine and the UK's policy response<sup>11</sup>. Given that the Ukrainian refugee crisis had a comparatively specific date of commencement, attention was paid to the evolution of narratives in the political debate over the five-week period.

All political parties accepted the premise that those fleeing Ukraine wanted to remain in the area from which they had been driven so that they could return home as soon as possible. As Home Secretary Priti Patel explained, "people are fighting for the freedom of their country, and **family members and loved ones want to stay in the region**" (HC, 1 March 2022). Consequently, the UK government was implementing a "bespoke humanitarian response" to the crisis that supported the neighbouring countries. For those who had ties to the UK, it was expanding the family migration route, setting up pop-up visa centres in Poland, Moldova, Hungary, and Romania, scrapping language requirements, income thresholds, and visa application fees, allowing Ukrainians in the UK to extend their stay and setting up a new humanitarian route.

One of the most dominant narratives adopted a distinctly humanitarian frame and called for the **reduction of bureaucratic obstacles** and significant delays to people reaching the UK. Labour's Shadow Home Secretary, Yvette Cooper, argued that the government's response

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<sup>11</sup> The debates included: 'Ukraine: Urgent Refugee Applications' debated on 8 March 2022, 'Refugees from Ukraine' debated on 10 March, 'Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme' debated on 14 March 2022, and finally, 'Homes for Ukraine Scheme' debated on 31 March 2022

was “shameful” and pushing vulnerable people “from pillar to post in their hour of need” (HC, 10 March 2022). Referring to the geographical spread of visa centres, she stated that “mums with small kids” had to queue for days in freezing weather. She called on the government to cut the bureaucracy and bring in the armed forces to set up emergency centres for processing passports. Meanwhile, the SNP Home Affairs Spokesperson claimed that the only “simple and just” response was to waive visa requirements altogether. As one interviewee explained, “Scottish ministers were very concerned about their perception that the UK Government was trying to put barriers in the way of people fleeing war and persecution by insisting they apply for visas.” (UK\_I\_04).

Intriguingly, statements by Conservative MPs also demonstrated an appetite to cut the ‘red-tape’ and speed up the processing of visa applications. For instance, Conservative MP Sir Roger Gale called on the government to “do as we did in 1956 and 1968, cut through the red tape and get these people home so that their menfolk, who are fighting and dying on the streets of Kyiv, can at least know that their women and children are safe?”. This suggests that this narrative was not driven by party political ideology. This example also illustrates a strong link between the event-specific **bureaucratic obstacles narrative** and the master narrative on the **UK’s humanitarian tradition**.

In contrast, cabinet members invoked a distinctly securitised frame to the UK’s response to the crisis. According to the Home Secretary, Russian troops and extremists were trying to “infiltrate” and “merge with Ukrainian” forces and therefore posed a threat to the UK and its allies. Since the government had a collective **duty to keep the British people safe**, security and biometric checks on the people trying to come to the UK could not be suspended (HC, 1 March 2022). The threat frame was repeatedly illustrated with reference to the assassination attempt of Sergei and Yulia Skripal, a former Russian military officer and double agent for the British intelligence agencies, in Salisbury in March 2018 (also known as the Salisbury Poisonings). Similarly, Immigration Minister, Kevin Foster, stated that people were already arriving in Calais with false documentation, claiming to be Ukrainian to try **to take advantage of the system** (HC, 8 March 2022).

By 10 March 2022, Patel announced the expansion of the Ukraine Family Scheme to include extended family members. In response to accusations of indefensible bureaucracy, it was announced that to make the processes “**quicker and simpler**,” Ukrainians with passports would be able to apply online and provide their biometrics once in the UK. Opposition parties claimed that the government had been “dragged” towards a generous and comprehensive policy response, “kicking and screaming, by the Opposition, the media and the good British people” (HC, 14 March 2022). On 31 March, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities stated that they were “minimising bureaucratic foot-dragging and cutting unnecessary red tape” in response to criticism (HC, 31 March 2022). Nevertheless, the underlying narrative from the Home Secretary remained the same. The Home Office had two “overarching obligations”: the first to “keep the British people safe” and the second to help Ukrainians. Since a “small number of people with evil intentions can wreak havoc on our streets”, “vital” security checks on migrants would continue (HC, 10 March 2022).

The master narrative on the **UK’s humanitarian tradition** was one of the most frequently invoked narratives. Labour MPs repeatedly referred to how the UK must “do our bit, as we have done in generations past” (HC, 1 March 2022). Meanwhile, when the Homes for Ukraine

scheme was announced on 14 March, the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, Michael Gove, stated that:

Our country has a long and proud history of supporting the most vulnerable during their darkest hour. We took in refugees fleeing Hitler's Germany, those fleeing repression in Idi Amin's Uganda, and those who fled the atrocities of the Balkan wars. More recently, we have offered support to those fleeing persecution in Syria, Afghanistan and Hong Kong. We are doing so again with Homes for Ukraine. (HC, 14 March 2022)

The new sponsorship scheme raised a new event-specific narrative. Labour politicians called the programme a '**DIY asylum scheme**' that left Ukrainians responsible for advertising themselves to find a sponsor whilst the government took the credit. Meanwhile, the SNP described the new humanitarian sponsorship pathway as the government "palming off their responsibilities to communities" (HC, 31 March 2022).

### **Narrative components**

**Characters:** The predominant and often explicit 'villain' of all political narratives was overwhelmingly Putin and/or Russia. The only secondary 'villains' invoked by the government included those who might take advantage of the system if security measures were relaxed, including (economic) migrants pretending to be from Ukraine and (Russian) foreign agents/extremists trying to infiltrate the UK. Meanwhile, the opposition cast the government, the Home Office and occasionally the Home Secretary as the 'baddies' of the story for not doing more to support Ukrainian refugees. The 'victims' were consistently those fleeing Ukraine. The 'heroes' included the courageous Ukrainians and the "unfailingly compassionate" British public.

Once again, a distinct **gendered dimension** can be observed in the representation of 'victims' and 'heroes'. Labour's Yvette Cooper refers to families being split up, with "fathers and older children staying to fight while mothers, grandparents and younger children are leaving to find safety and sanctuary" (HC, 1 March 2022). Home Secretary Priti Patel also states on multiple occasions that those coming to the UK will inevitably be women and children due to Ukraine's conscription policy, with men staying behind to fight. The focus on allocating these characteristics to specific groups and individuals reflects the 'lay' narrative style.

**Setting:** Representatives of all political parties invoked vivid imagery of the inhumane conditions those fleeing Ukraine were suffering. People were being left "freezing by the roadside with their children", with references to the bleak weather conditions in Poland (HC, 14 March 2022). Opposition parties also depicted chaos in Calais and long queues at visa centres due to a lack of clarity on the location of emergency visa centres. The most common policy or legislative 'setting' invoked was the Nationality and Borders Bill, which was making its way through Parliament at the time. Labour, the SNP and the Liberal Democrats refer to how Clause 11 of the Bill would criminalise Ukrainians who made it to the UK to apply for protection since they would arrive through "safe third countries". According to one SNP MP, the government was "using the Nationality and Borders Bill as a tool to criminalise those who seek sanctuary in our country" (HC, 14 March 2022). In all cases, the urgency, personalised and vivid language used to illustrate the crisis setting suggests a 'lay' narrative style.



**Plot:** As with the first case, a clear distinction in narrative plots can be observed between the government and the opposition parties, with members of the government invoking narratives of 'control' and stories of progress, whilst the opposition, in their criticism of the government more frequently referred to the declining situation. The only deviations from these opposing positions included criticism of the Homes for Ukraine scheme, which more closely reflected Stone's (2002, 142) 'change is an illusion' plot (suggesting the scheme would be unsuccessful) and the government's narrative on Russian spies trying to infiltrate the UK through migration flows, which more accurately reflects a 'conspiracy' plot. In all cases, the narrative plots are clear, simple, and often dramatic, reflecting a 'lay' narrative style.

**Moral/policy solution:** The government foregrounded its "agile", "pragmatic", and "flexible" response in setting up new visa schemes whilst ensuring the security of British citizens. Opposition parties welcomed the government's "U-turn" and called for the scrapping of bureaucratic obstacles to applying for a visa for the UK. The SNP, for example, called for further expansion of existing schemes, such as allowing Ukrainian students and workers without permanent residency to bring relatives to the UK. The SNP also called for the government to waive visa requirements, with support from some Labour backbenchers. However, the Shadow Cabinet focused on calls to reduce bureaucratic obstacles and delays to visas while keeping essential security checks. This solution was also expressed by Conservative MPs (although not members of the cabinet). Despite a relative consensus among opposition parties and backbenchers that the UK government needed to do more to protect Ukrainians, the proposed solutions are generally immediate/short-term without acknowledgement of any impediments (accommodation, costs etc.) and highly moralistic, suggesting a 'lay' narrative style.

More generally, we can observe some variation in narrative style between different debates and narratives. For instance, debates that focused on a specific visa scheme, such as the debate on 31 March on the Home for Ukraine scheme, tended to be more technocratic in style. The narrators often shared more detailed information on the scheme and its implementation in a non-narrative style. Moreover, a less narrative discourse was observed from MPs when enquiring about more parochial issues specific to their constituencies or specific immigration cases.

### *c) Relationship between Media and Political Narratives ('Communicative Sphere')*

The complex interplay between narratives in the media and in political debate is once again highlighted in this case, with references made in *The Guardian* to an urgent question to the Home Secretary in Parliament on 31 March on the "Kafkaesque" visa process. However, in contrast to the first case study, the most dominant narratives on the Ukrainian refugee crisis appeared to be less driven by the ideological affiliation of the narrator (newspaper or politician) and any divergence in the dominant narratives did not necessarily fall along party-political lines. The event-specific narrative on the **bureaucratic obstacles** of the government's response to the crisis was, for example, **embraced** by all three newspapers and representatives of the main political parties, including the Conservative party. This narrative in both the media and political debate was frequently accompanied by the notion that the Home Office and the Home Secretary were lagging behind public opinion, demand from Parliament and even from within

the Conservative party to welcome those fleeing Ukraine and avoid "red tape" like the UK's European allies.

Nevertheless, some nuances can be observed regarding the 'policy solution/moral of the story' component of the narrative. Whilst *The Guardian* and the SNP explicitly called for visa requirements to be waived entirely, *The Times*, the *Daily Mail* and Labour's Shadow Cabinet were more ambiguous on the details, calling for a more humane approach and for bureaucracy to be reduced without explicitly calling for visas and security checks to be scrapped. In the *Daily Mail*, we can observe some cognitive dissonance in the proposed solutions to the crisis with calls for visas for Ukrainians to be scrapped but security checks not to be dropped, reflecting a decidedly 'lay' narrative style.

Adopting a more temporal approach to the dissemination of narratives, there was evidence to suggest that the government responded to the calls to reduce bureaucratic obstacles to welcoming Ukrainians in the UK in the media and by the opposition parties. By 10 March, the government had not only expanded visa schemes but had also shifted its narrative to highlight the "agility" and "flexibility" of its approach, **rejecting** the narrative of overt bureaucracy in the government's policy response to the Ukrainian refugee crisis.

Another dominant narrative that appeared in all coverage and political debates was **Britain's historical tradition of offering refuge to those fleeing persecution**, especially in Europe. Intriguingly, the narrative is invoked by all newspapers, by the government and by the Opposition. The narrative appears to be strategically deployed both to call for the government to do more and invoked by the government to demonstrate how their approach was meeting the UK's traditional role as a 'state of refuge'. This is a clear example of **adaptation**, whereby the issue definition has been embraced by all political actors, but the 'moral of the story' is adapted to fulfil the narrator's objectives: a 'call to action' by the media and opposition parties in the first instance, and the legitimisation/justification of the government's approach in the second instance.

The less dominant narratives identified also appeared in both the media and political debate. The narrative that those fleeing Ukraine should be **sheltered in the region of origin** was most frequently espoused by government members as justification for the humanitarian approach in the region. In this case, there appears to be alignment across the centre and right-wing media and the government's position. This narrative was significantly less prevalent in discourse from opposition parties. Meanwhile, the narrative that the UK government had **closed off safe routes into the UK and was trying to criminalise irregular entry** under the Nationality and Borders Bill was mirrored in the centre and left-wing press and opposition parties, especially representatives of the Labour Party and SNP. The narrative invoked most frequently by members of the cabinet regarding the responsibility to **keep the British people safe** from those who might take advantage of the asylum system was not a dominant narrative in the media but was observed in the *Daily Mail*.

The **labour market narrative** expressed in *The Times* did not appear in political debate. In fact, very few references to Brexit or the labour market were made in political debate on Ukraine. The **omission** of this narrative suggests no issue-linkage between the Ukrainian refugee crisis and the British labour market or economy. Similarly, the **critical race narrative** that appeared in *The Guardian* was not invoked in the parliamentary debates analysed. One Labour MP brought up the treatment of people with a "BAME background" based on reports

that they were being turned away at the Ukrainian border (HC, 8 March 2022). Nevertheless, the notion of a hierarchy of asylum seekers based on country of origin or ethnicity was not specifically addressed<sup>12</sup>.

#### *d) Narratives in Policymaking ('Coordinative' Sphere)*

Five documents published by the Home Office and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) were selected. First, the *Home Office Annual Report and Accounts 2021-2022* and *2022-2023*, published on 31 March 2022 and 18 September 2023, respectively, were analysed. These reports include a foreword by the Home Office Permanent Secretary and an introduction by the respective Home Secretaries (Priti Patel, in the former, and Suella Bravermann, in the latter). The intended audience is internal officials, policy experts and stakeholders responsible for policy delivery. Given that the response to Ukraine was managed across the Home Office and the DLUHC, the annual reviews of the latter, published on 19 July 2022 and 18 July 2023, were also analysed. Finally, the *New Plan for Immigration: Legal Migration and Border Control* was published by the Home Office in July 2022 (updated in November 2022). This document sets out the government's immigration strategy until 2025. It includes a foreword by the Home Secretary, a section on context, policy 'successes' and planning, and was presented to Parliament by the Home Secretary. Consequently, it can be considered to comprise both a communicative and coordinative function.

The policy documents contained very few narratives related to the Ukrainian refugee crisis compared with the political debate. Generally, the focus was on the speed with which the Home Office and the DLUHC developed and implemented new safe and legal routes to the UK for those fleeing Ukraine. Home Secretary Patel referred to the Home Office's ability to "respond with agility and speed to global events", stating the UK was at the "forefront of the humanitarian responses, including standing up schemes from scratch to help thousands of people reach safety" (Home Office 2022b). The Ukrainian visa programmes are also referred to as the **fastest implemented and biggest visa programmes in UK history**. The Permanent Secretary of the Home Office, Matthew Rycroft, also repeatedly raised the speed with which the Home Office set up new and legal routes for Ukrainians, referring to the "swift and multifaceted" response to the crisis, stating:

"we rapidly stood up and implemented two humanitarian visa schemes to provide a safe route for Ukrainians who want to come to the UK, demonstrating the UK's generous support for the Ukrainian people." (Home Office 2022b, 9)

Rycroft repeated the sentiment the following year, stating that the Home Office "prepared world-leading legislation at pace and used it within hours of its coming into force" (Home Office 2023c). This narrative was explicitly linked to the new (post-Brexit) visa system and digitisation of visa processing, which had enabled the quick and efficient development of the new programmes. Moreover, the government had prioritised the response to Ukraine. Issue linkage was also observed in other policy areas, which are set out in the breakdown of narrative components.

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<sup>12</sup> However, this narrative did feature in more general debates on the invasion of Ukraine at the time. For instance, former Shadow Home Secretary Diana Abbott commented that it was "easier to be humane with refugees who look like us" in a House of Commons debate on Ukraine on 15 March 2022.



## Narrative components

**Characters:** The only **villains** identified in relation to the Ukrainian refugee crisis were Russia and Putin. The **victims** were Ukrainians and families fleeing the conflict. Notably, there was no mention of ‘women and children’ beyond the infrequent reference to families, suggesting no significant gendered dimension on this occasion. The dominant **heroes** included the Home Office and the government for establishing new visa schemes and the UK, more generally, for being at the forefront of the humanitarian response and its “generous support for the Ukrainian people” (Home Office 2022b, 9). Ukrainians are also presented as ‘courageous’. Finally, the DLUHC refers to the close collaboration with the devolved governments and institutions to establish the Homes for Ukraine Scheme, local government, charities, faith groups, businesses and communities “all working together to provide much-needed support to Ukrainians arriving under the scheme” (DLUHC 2023).

**Setting:** The Home Office’s annual reviews refer to the Ukrainian refugee crisis as an external shock, ‘world event’, and a ‘major international event’ alongside Covid-19. Frequent reference is made to a “backdrop of significant volatility”, “conflict and instability around the world”, and the departmental response to emerging crises, specifically in relation to Ukraine and Afghanistan. The crisis is also set out in terms of a “key risk”/risk management due to the additional workload to set up the new visa schemes. Moreover, demand for visas to enter the UK had more than doubled in 2022-23, and:

for the majority of 2022 the business was significantly impacted by the Ukraine crisis and the subsequent backlogs that were generated as resource was redeployed to support the new Ukraine Humanitarian and Family Scheme routes. (Home Office 2023c)

Meanwhile, the DLUHC linked the crisis to its policy remit, namely to housing pressures and costs (supporting “thousands of Ukrainians fleeing conflict to find accommodation across the UK”) and its homelessness agenda (increased pressure on homelessness services).

**Plot:** Given that policy documentation did not feature complete narratives on the Ukrainian refugee crisis, the only identifiable plot was a ‘story of progress and success’ in relation to setting up the Ukrainian visa schemes.

**Moral/policy solution:** The visa programmes are presented as the only policy solution to the Ukrainian crisis. The Home Office linked the success of the new programmes to the digitisation agenda under the new Future Borders Immigration System (FBIS), which had enabled new visa schemes, such as the Ukrainian scheme to be set up at pace, effectively and efficiently. At the same time, DLUHC focused on the welcome, resettlement and integration of people seeking safety in the UK. This entailed a more detailed discussion of policy and implementation, such as the eligibility of those who arrive via one of the Ukrainian schemes to social housing and homelessness assistance; the distribution of £1.89 million in funding to local authorities to establish 29 ‘welcome points’ in key ports of arrival, access to basic humanitarian aid, translation services and advice, as well as support for sponsors who offered accommodation under the Homes for Ukraine Scheme and councils to support integration.

Overall, the texts in policy documents were predominantly technocratic in style and often did not include any narrative elements, focusing instead on the details of policy implementation, data, and statistics.

### *e) Circulation of Narratives in the 'Communicative' and 'Coordinative' Spheres*

Comparing narratives in the media and political debate with policy documents reveals very few similarities. The dominant narratives in the communicative sphere did not feature in the coordinative sphere. Breaking down the narratives into their four constituent components, similarities can only be observed related to the characters and proposed policy solutions. There appears to be broad agreement on villains, victims, and heroes of the Ukrainian refugee crisis across the two spheres. However, variation can be observed since there appears to be no apparent gendered dimension in the representation of victims in policy documentation. As one may expect, there is some alignment between the proposed policy solutions expressed by members of the cabinet and policy narratives, namely in relation to the new Ukrainian visa programmes.

This notwithstanding, the divergence in narratives between the two spheres does not necessarily signify contestation. Most policy documentation on Ukraine published by the Home Office and the DLUHC consisted of guidance for the new visa schemes or highly technocratic legal documents, such as statements on changes to immigration rules, which did not incorporate narrative elements. This is further exemplified by the variation in narrative style. Narratives in the political debate, both from the government and opposition, were predominantly 'lay' in style. Meanwhile, policy documentation, in this case, was highly technocratic, focusing on policy details relevant to the successful implementation of the new visa programmes. When narrative elements were invoked, they were technocratic in style: generalisable features involving data, legislative context, and policy development, more complex incorporating a broader set of factors, generally, more 'objective' and less grounded in a moral perspective.

Another important factor should not be overlooked. Despite the variations in narratives, the most dominant narratives were not driven by political ideology. By the debate in Parliament on 1 March, there was a broad consensus that people fleeing Ukraine should be welcomed in the UK. Opposition parties claimed that the government had been "dragged" towards a generous and comprehensive policy response which resulted in a 'U-turn' in their approach to the Ukrainian refugee crisis. The interviews with Home Office officials provided a slightly more nuanced explanation. One interviewee revealed that, initially,

"the feeling within the Home Office was Russia and Ukraine; what's that got to do with us? It's not an ex-British colony, and, you know, for once, we are not in any way involved. Then everybody's attitude swung violently in support of the Ukrainians, and the Home Office didn't have a plan. [However] there was no way alone in Europe the UK could have said we're not taking any Ukrainians" (UK\_I\_1)

This suggests that the high political salience of the crisis put the government under pressure to deliver policy outcomes in line with public sentiment. It also supports the proposition that in this case, under immense pressure to deliver tangible policies in a short period of time, policy practice was decoupled from the more 'lay' narratives invoked in the political debate on how to respond to the Ukrainian crisis.

## f) Concluding remarks

The Conservative government's policy response to the evolving refugee crisis was the object of sustained and intense media scrutiny following the invasion of Ukraine, creating significant pressure to meet public expectations. This was exemplified by the somewhat counter-intuitive position adopted by the usually anti-immigration tabloid, the *Daily Mail*. The newspaper's position on the Ukrainian refugee crisis was illustrated by a highly successful funding appeal, which was launched within days of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The *Daily Mail*, *Mail on Sunday*, and *MailOnline*'s Ukrainian Refugee Appeal raised over £12 million for those fleeing Ukraine. The campaign received support from Prime Minister Boris Johnson, Labour leader Keir Starmer, and countless other public figures (News Media Association 2022).

Within the communicative sphere, the dominant narratives were predominantly humanitarian in nature. In contrast to 2015, the press and all political actors referred to those fleeing Ukraine as 'refugees', despite Ukrainians not legally qualifying under the narrow definition set out in the 1951 Refugee Convention. Moreover, across all narratives, the primary victims of the crisis were also perceived as families, women and children 'deserving' of protection equal to refugee status, even if they were entering the UK via an alternative visa scheme. Whilst initially invoking more securitised narratives on Ukraine, in debates on Ukrainian refugees, the government soon focused on its "humanitarian approach" and the delivery of the new visa schemes (whilst retaining security checks on those arriving in Britain). Consequently, whilst the narratives demonstrate contestation regarding the best policy solution to the crisis, by 1 March 2022, there was a consensus on welcoming Ukrainians to the UK.

Finally, within the context of high media and political salience (see Figure 5) and immense pressure to deliver new visa schemes in a short period of time, narratives in the coordinative sphere were decoupled from more rhetorical commitments made in the communicative sphere both with regards to narrative style and content.

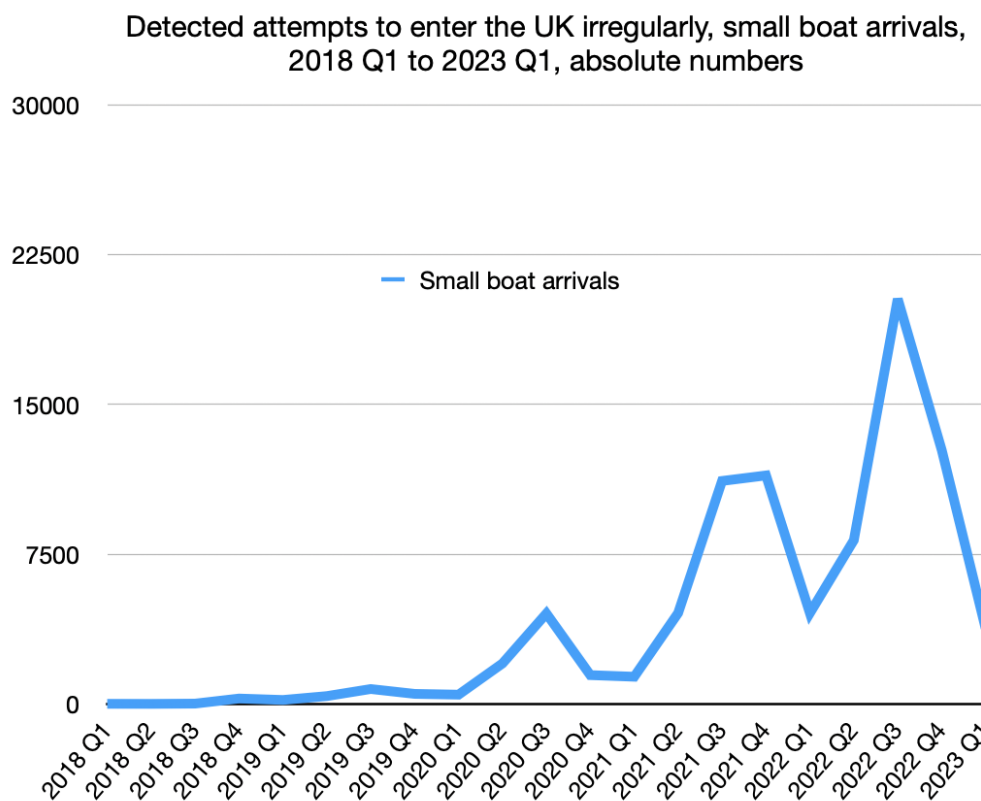
### 3.3 'Small Boat' Arrivals

Migrants crossing the English Channel from France in small boats and dinghies emerged as a new route to reach the UK in 2018. In December 2018, Home Secretary Sajid Javid declared a "major incident" after a surge in arrivals in the final weeks of the year (Mohdin 2018). Since then, the number of detected small boat arrivals has significantly increased from 299 in 2018 to 45,755 in 2022, as illustrated by Figure 7 (Home Office 2023b). Images of dinghies and small vessels off the coast have filled British newspapers, and as the numbers have grown, political debate has intensified. Moreover, following a period of low public salience, immigration is once again climbing up the agenda (see Figure 4). In response, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has pledged to 'stop the boats' as one of his five top priorities while in office.

Successive plans by the government to deter arrivals have made life more challenging for asylum seekers but appear to have had little impact on the numbers arriving by small boats. The government's most recent efforts are based on the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 and the new Illegal Migration Act 2023, which make irregular migrants inadmissible to make a claim for asylum in the UK and places a duty on the Home Secretary to remove irregular arrivals.

The UK government has also signed an agreement to relocate asylum seekers who enter the UK irregularly to Rwanda, where their claims would be processed, and they would be resettled if successful, in return for £120m of development aid. According to critics, these proposals represent a major breach of the UK’s humanitarian and legal obligations, effectively ending the right to asylum for irregular arrivals whilst providing few alternative safe and legal routes to protection. On 15 November 2023, the highest court in the UK, the Supreme Court, unanimously ruled the government’s policy to remove asylum seekers arriving irregularly to Rwanda unlawful, backing a pre-existing Court of Appeal judgement. Nevertheless, political debates on how to respond to small boat arrivals and the ‘Rwanda plan’ are ongoing, and, with 20,000 arrivals recorded so far in 2023, it is not likely to decrease in intensity in the near future.

**FIGURE 7. ‘SMALL BOAT’ ARRIVALS (2018-2023)**



Source: (Home Office 2023b)

Since this case study examines an ongoing policy debate, the analysis concentrates on the period immediately before and after the Memorandum of Understanding between the United Kingdom and Rwanda was signed to capture the development of narratives on ‘small boats’ and outsourcing asylum processing to third countries.

### a) Narratives in the Media

The analysis of media narratives focuses on articles in *The Times*, *The Guardian*, and *The Daily Mail*, published between September 2021 and June 2022. This timeframe captures a number of peaks in coverage on ‘small boats’, including responses to an incident in the Channel on 25 November 2021, when 27 people died who were attempting to reach England

in a small boat, the response to the MoU with Rwanda signed on 15 April 2022, and increased politicisation of ‘small boat’ arrivals that summer. Once again, the data is predominantly gathered from editorials, so the narratives reflect the editorial stance of the newspapers.

All newspapers feature a **‘pull factor’ narrative** in coverage of small boat arrivals. *The Guardian* describes the people “risking their lives” to reach the UK’s south coast as coming from some of the world’s “most troubled” countries (Eritrea, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen). They make the journey because they have ties to the UK, including friends or family, historical links, or speak English. Moreover, two-thirds of those who arrive by small boat are eligible to claim asylum. *The Times* refers to common language, family ties, and the promise of opportunities and benefits as a ‘pull factor’. Whereas the *Daily Mail* argues that migrants have a ‘powerful incentive’ to reach the UK since once they arrive, there is little chance of deportation, regardless of whether asylum claims are genuine or not. Moreover, *The Times* and the *Daily Mail* state that the perception that Britain has lost control of its border and the “visible flouting of border controls” **encourages smugglers and migrants to attempt dangerous journeys** exasperating the problem (Times, 9 September 2021).

*The Times* also highlights the political problem the increase in ‘small boat’ arrivals poses for the government. Prime Minister Boris Johnson had promised that **‘taking back control of immigration’ was going to be a benefit of Brexit**, including making it easier to deport people, which would act as a deterrent (Times, 19 November 2021). However, since leaving the Dublin Regulation, the UK no longer has a legal basis for returning migrants across the Channel. Moreover, the Rwanda plan is described by both *The Times* and *The Guardian* as a **“political stunt as opposed to a workable solution** to a growing problem” (Times, 5 May 2022). According to *The Guardian*, Johnson and Home Secretary Priti Patel are engaged in politics of “performative cruelty” for their own political gains. Following a loss of confidence in Downing Street due to law-breaking during the COVID-19 pandemic (‘Partygate’), Johnson is instrumentalising a crackdown on immigration to rally anti-immigration voters and put pressure on peers and MPs who are blocking the Nationality and Borders Bill (Guardian, 14 April 2022). The scheme is referred to as “cynical” and “cold-hearted”.

Invoking a narrative of the **UK as a rule-of-law state**, *The Times* argues that as the government’s solutions become more “fantastical”, they are falling short of the UK’s obligations under national and international law. For instance, offshoring asylum processing would breach the 1951 Refugee Conventions and the UK’s own human rights laws. **Rwanda is a country with significant human rights issues**, including “arbitrary killings and detentions, forced disappearances, and harsh and life-threatening prison conditions” (Guardian, 14 April 2022). Therefore, Rwanda’s “chequered human rights record” raises concerns regarding the principle of *non-refoulement* (Times, 5 May 2022). The treatment of LGBTQ+ people is also highlighted.

In another narrative, the Rwanda scheme is described as ineffectual and unlikely to act as a **deterrent to migrants trying to reach the UK** by crossing the Channel. It is described as expensive, inhumane, “at odds with this country’s history of commitment to refugees”, and likely illegal (Guardian, 14 April 2022). Moreover, it has “no feasible prospect of achieving its ostensible goal – deterrence of migrants crossing the Channel in small boats” (Guardian, 15 June 2022). Whereas, the *Daily Mail*, suggests the Rwanda plan *will* act as a deterrent by **disrupting human-trafficking and smuggling gangs’ business model** because who would pay to come to the UK if they end up 4000 miles away in central Africa?



Meanwhile, a narrative in the *Daily Mail* in support of the government's Rwanda policy claims that those arriving across the Channel in boats are **not 'genuine asylum seekers' but economic migrants seeking a better life**, who are a "security risk, a huge financial burden for taxpayers, a strain on public services, and a kick in the teeth for migrants trying to come here legally" (Daily Mail, 15 April 2022). *The Times* disseminates a similar narrative in one editorial but added a gendered dimension, stating that the "vast majority were young, single men, most of whom were economic migrants" (Times, 14 April 2022). The *Daily Mail* also mirrors the **invasion** master narrative stating that "record numbers are landing illegally on our beaches" (Daily Mail, 14 April 2022) and the "human tide" of small boat arrivals is "threatening to overwhelm some communities" (Daily Mail, 26 September 2022).

Finally, a narrative that is only featured in *The Guardian* invokes a **hierarchy of asylum seekers**. Echoing the critical race narrative in the Ukrainian case, the Rwanda scheme is described as an "expulsion exercise" with colonial-era echoes and as fundamentally racist, as it is "unlikely white Ukrainians asylum seekers...would ever be sent to Rwanda" (Guardian, 14 April 2022).

### **Narrative components**

**Characters: Villains** in the left-wing and centre newspapers consist predominantly of the Prime Minister and Home Secretary for their opportunistic ways and apparent disdain for the 1951 Refugee Convention. Rwanda is also cast in a negative light for its "human rights abuses". However, the *Daily Mail* vilifies "activist lawyers who thwart deportations with a merry-go-round of bogus human rights appeals" and "Labour's open-borders cheerleaders" (Daily Mail, 15 April 2022). So-called 'illegal migrants' are also cast as villains. One editorial in *The Times* also vilifies irregular entry, referring to 'illegal migrants' as mainly 'young, single men', adding a gendered dimension. Finally, people smugglers operating in the Channel are seen as villains in all three papers.

The **victims** of the narratives are more closely aligned and include asylum seekers, 'Channel migrants', and refugees. *The Guardian* and *The Times* also refer to the 100 men selected for ejection to Rwanda (Iranians, Sudanese, Afghans, Eritreans, and Iraqis) and LGBTQ+ people in Rwanda. Finally, the left-wing press heralds charities, such as Freedom from Torture and human rights lawyers who have started legal action to block flights to Rwanda as **heroes**, as well as other actors critical of the government's response to 'small boat' arrivals, including senior leadership of the Church of England and King Charles. The *Daily Mail*, on the other hand, applauds Johnson for 'taking on' the liberal left. All newspapers featured personalised stories of people's suffering and allocated blame to individual actors, suggesting a 'lay' narrative style.

**Settings:** Geographical settings included northern France, the English Channel, the south coast of England, Brook House immigration removal centre, West Africa, and Kigali in Rwanda. The situational context focused predominantly on the surge in the number of 'small boat' arrivals. However, the *Guardian* compares this with statistics of asylum applications in the early 2000s and with other European countries. All newspapers also picked up the incident on 25 November 2021 to illustrate the 'crisis'. Political settings included law-breaking during the COVID-19 pandemic ("Partygate") and local elections. Meanwhile, policy and legislative settings predominantly included the Nationality and Borders Bill and national and international human rights law. In this case, settings were varied. However, this was largely due to the



extended timeframe, and settings still tended to be urgent and focused on a single event reflecting a 'lay' narrative style.

**Plots** also varied based on the narratives. Criticism of the Rwanda plan tended to reflect the "change is only an illusion" plot, suggesting there was no evidence that the scheme would act as a deterrent. Criticism of Johnson and Patel more closely mirrored a "conspiracy" plot, arguing that the Rwanda plan was a political stunt by a small group of government elites who knew it was not a viable policy solution. Narratives in the *Daily Mail* more closely reflected 'stories of progress' in praise of the government's approach or 'stymied progress' because of left-wing actors and human rights lawyers blocking government policy. Plots were predominantly dramatic, illustrating a clear cause and effect and a 'lay' narrative style.

**Moral/policy solution:** *The Guardian* called for closer collaboration with France and the UK's European partners to develop a pragmatic and just approach to process claims fairly and return those who do not qualify for asylum. It also proposed giving asylum seekers access to the labour market whilst claims are processed and the need for an honest discussion about safe and legal routes to the UK that would reduce demand for dangerous Channel crossings. *The Times* also argued that there is no solution to 'small boat' arrivals that does not rely on intense cooperation with other countries and called for greater cooperation with France in stopping smuggling gangs. Both *Daily Mail* and *The Times* called for the conviction of cross-Channel people smugglers to deter the vulnerable from making perilous journeys. Notably, narratives both for and against the government's policies offer very little in the way of alternative approaches, suggesting a 'lay' narrative style.

### *b) Narratives in Political Debate*

Three debates in parliament were analysed to determine dominant narratives on small boats and the Rwanda plan in political debate. They include a debate on the incident on 25 November 2021 when 27 people died in the Channel, a government statement and debate on the Rwanda scheme following its announcement, and a debate on asylum seekers and removals to Rwanda. Finally, a set of Home Office questions on 'Small Boat Channel Crossings' were also selected for analysis.

The dominant narrative espoused by the government was that to effectively control borders and protect 'genuine' asylum seekers, **'illegal migration' to the UK needed to be tackled**. According to the Home Secretary, the best way to tackle uncontrolled 'illegal' Channel crossings was to **stop the people smuggling gangs** by breaking their business model and shutting down the routes (HC, 17 January 2022). This could be achieved by reducing demand for their services by deterring people from trying to reach the UK.

In a related narrative, Ministers argued that the UK's asylum system was being "gamed" by traffickers, economic migrants and rights lawyers and needed to be fixed. The government's new plan for immigration, supported in law by the Nationality and Borders Bill, would **"end many of the pull factors"** that facilitated and encouraged 'illegal migration' and deter illegal and dangerous routes of entry (HC, 25 November 2021). The Bill introduced measures to deter migrants, including enabling the external processing of asylum claims, a differentiated approach, and the inadmissibility of claims by those who arrived irregularly or through safe third countries.

Moreover, by **outsourcing asylum processing to a safe third country** under the Rwanda scheme and removing people with no legal basis to be in the country, the demand for people smugglers would be reduced. Those who *did* travel to the UK by illegal and dangerous routes, including by small boats across the Channel, would be relocated to Rwanda for processing. However, not all Conservative MPs appeared to support the Rwanda plan. Most notably, former Prime Minister and Home Secretary Theresa May stated that she did not support the plan “on the grounds of legality, practicality or efficacy” (HD, 19 April 2022).

Patel also argued that not all migrants who enter the country ‘illegally’ were eligible for protection, and **economic migrants were masquerading as asylum seekers**, “elbowing women and children who need help and support out of the way” (HC, 25 November 2021). This narrative echoes the master narrative on economic migrants trying to take advantage of generous asylum policies. Moreover, according to Patel, ‘illegal migration’ was putting “unsustainable pressures” on our public services and local communities, invoking the **invasion** master narrative (HC 19 April 2022). Ministers and Conservative MPs also repeatedly embedded narratives in the master narrative on the “**UK’s long and proud history of offering sanctuary** to refugees. In recent years, Syria, Hong Kong, Afghanistan and, more recently, Ukraine” (HC, 19 April 2022).

All opposition parties questioned the **costs** of the Rwanda scheme and whether it would **deter** people from trying to reach the UK in small boats challenging the government’s narrative. There was no evidence to support the claim that the Rwanda plan would act as a deterrent, as smugglers have no interest in what happened to people once they arrived in the UK. SNP Home Affairs Spokesperson Stuart McDonald described the Rwanda scheme as a “cruel” and “catastrophic” policy that would not deter smugglers, but it will further seriously harm people who have fled persecution” (HC, 19 April 2022).

Shadow Home Secretary Yvette Cooper stated that the government’s approach was “unworkable”, “unethical” and “extortionate in their cost to the British taxpayer” (HC, 19 April 2022). Moreover, the Nationality and Borders Bill undermined respect for the rule of law and the Labour party would not support a Bill, which breaches the Refugee Convention, thereby **damaging the UK’s reputation around the world**. This narrative was also disseminated by the SNP, who argued that the Rwanda scheme would also damage the **UK’s reputation for upholding international law**. Finally, both Labour and SNP suggested that the timing of the announcement of the MoU with Rwanda was a **political stunt** to distract the public from the Prime Minister’s political crisis in relation to the breach of lockdown rules during the COVID-19 pandemic (‘Partygate’).

### **Narrative components**

**Characters:** The main **villains** of all narratives were people smugglers and human traffickers (often used interchangeably), and organised criminals who profit from human misery. The government also vilified ‘illegal migrants’, who entered the country irregularly. Meanwhile, opposition parties referred to the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary in a negative light. The dominant **victims** were overwhelmingly vulnerable people put in peril by criminal gangs, but also ‘genuine’ asylum seekers. A gendered dimension can be observed in the government’s representation of ‘victims’, which focuses on “women, children, and even babies” forced into unseaworthy vessels. **Heroes** are predominantly all actors working with the government on finding solutions to the ‘crisis’, including the Royal Navy, Ministry of Defence,

IOM and UNHCR, the UK's French counterpart, National Crime Agency, frontline law enforcement officers etc. Once again, narratives allocated blame to individual actors, suggesting a 'lay' narrative style.

**Setting:** Geographical settings included northern France, the English Channel, and Rwanda. The situational context focused predominantly on the notion of a 'global migration crisis' or an 'illegal migration crisis', demonstrated by the surge in 'small boat' arrivals. The incident on 25 November 2021 also provided context for the discussion on tackling small boat arrivals. The political settings included "Partygate" and local elections, while policy and legislative settings focused on the Nationality and Borders Bill and national and international human rights law. Overall, settings tended to involve data, legislative context, and detail on policy development, suggesting a more 'technocratic' narrative style.

**Plot:** As with the previous cases, a clear distinction in narrative plots can be observed between the government and the opposition parties, with members of the government invoking narratives of 'control' and stories of progress, whilst the opposition, in their criticism of the government more frequently referred to the declining situation. Plots remained dramatic, illustrating a simple cause and effect and a 'lay' narrative style.

**Moral/policy solution:** The government focused on tackling long-term 'pull factors' of the asylum system, smashing criminal gangs and supply chains by tackling issues upstream. Moreover, closer cooperation was needed with France, including joint patrols to prevent dangerous journeys from taking place. Finally, barriers to removals needed to be lifted. Meanwhile, the Labour Party and SNP called for more safe and legal routes to protection. Across the board, proposed policy solutions were simplistic, often lacking detail on the implementation of proposed policy solutions and set out as morally righteous, demonstrating a decidedly 'lay' narrative style.

### *c) Relationship between Media and Political Narratives ('Communicative Sphere)*

Once again, considerable similarities can be observed in the dominant narratives in the media and in political debate and appear to be predominantly driven by the political affiliation of the narrator. *Daily Mail* supported the government's plans to tackle 'illegal migration', calling it "bold and imaginative" and claiming that it demonstrates a determination to "take back control of our borders" (*Daily Mail*, 16 April 2022). In fact, narratives on the need to disrupt human-trafficking and smuggling gangs' business model are **mirrored** across government statements and the right-wing tabloid. Similarly, narratives on economic migrants masquerading as asylum seekers and 'illegal migration' putting pressure on our public services and local communities espoused by the government are also **embraced** in the *Daily Mail*. These narratives echo the master narrative on 'genuine' asylum seekers versus economic migrants trying to take advantage of generous asylum policies, conflating notions of the 'genuine' and 'bogus' asylum seeker with the method by which people enter the country and the invasion master narrative.

Along similar lines, narratives questioning costs and the effectiveness of the Rwanda plan as a deterrent to migrants trying to reach the UK invoked by opposition parties feature in *The Guardian* and *The Times*. Moreover, criticism of the government's announcement of the Rwanda agreements as a political stunt as opposed to a workable solution to the small boat

crisis is also **mirrored** across both venues. All actors also embrace the master narrative of the UK's long and proud history of offering sanctuary to refugees.

Instances of the **adaptation** of narratives can also be observed. This is most apparent in the case of narratives on tackling illegal migration by disrupting people-smuggling gangs and reducing 'pull factors'. In this case, the 'policy solution' is adapted to justify and legitimise the government's approach, specifically the Nationality and Borders Bill and the new plan for immigration, including the Rwanda scheme. The government also **rejects** the narrative invoked by opposition parties and the press that its approach would breach national and international laws, arguing that Rwanda is a safe and secure country that is beholden to the same legal obligations on human rights as the UK. The only narratives in the press that were **ignored** in the political debate related to Brexit and the notion of a hierarchy of asylum seekers.

Finally, the analysis of narrative components in this case supports the premise that narratives in the communicative sphere (both in the media and political debate) are predominantly 'lay' in style. The only exception related to detailed references to the legislative context and policy developments in political debate as a new immigration Bill was making its way through Parliament at the time.

#### *d) Narratives in Policymaking ('Coordinative' Sphere)*

Five documents setting out the government's policy approach were selected for analysis. Home Office annual reports 2021-2022 and 2022-2023, and the *New Plan for Immigration: Legal Migration and Border Control* are once again analysed, but this time focusing on small boat arrivals and the MoU with Rwanda. The *Home Office Outcome Delivery Plan: 2021 to 2022* published on 15 July 2021 is also examined. This is a departmental plan that sets out the Home Office's objectives for the year and how they plan to achieve them in policy. It sets out the aims, priority outcomes and delivery plans of the different departments by ministerial portfolio. The final document is the Memorandum of Understanding between the government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the government of the Republic of Rwanda for the provision of an asylum partnership arrangement published on 14 April 2022. As it is a technical document that sets out the details of the arrangement between the two countries - firmly in the coordinative sphere - the analysis focuses on the preamble to the document.

According to the Home Office annual reports, the "record levels of small boat arrivals have placed a strain on our asylum system" (Home Office 2023c). Therefore, a comprehensive policy package had been developed to tackle illegal migration, with the New Plan for Immigration and the delivery of the Nationality and Borders Act at its heart (Home Office 2022b). The Act would reform immigration laws to **deter illegal entry** into the UK. Moreover, the new Migration and Economic Development Partnership with Rwanda would enable the government to tackle illegal entry, **people smugglers** who endanger life and limit the legal claims by those with no right to be in the UK, "strengthen[ing] our approach to safe and legal routes and bring in tougher border protections".

Similarly, the Home Office's priority outcome number four, titled 'Tackle illegal migration, remove those with no right to be here and protect the vulnerable', set out in the Delivery Plan, invokes a narrative on stopping 'illegal migration' (and small boat arrivals) by **tackling smuggling gangs**, stating that the Home Office will continue to "target and disrupt the

organised immigration criminals who facilitate illegal migration, intervene upstream along high-risk migration routes and reduce the incentives behind illegal migration, including by preventing crossings by small boats” (Home Office 2021, 17).

The preamble to the MoU with Rwanda also sets out the government’s priorities as tackling the “illegally facilitated and unlawful cross border migration”, to “**deter illegal migration** and create safe and legal routes for those fleeing persecution” and “**counter the business model of the human smugglers**”. The document also invokes the UK’s **long proud history** of providing protection to those who need it.

### **Narrative components**

**Characters:** The main **villains** are people smugglers and human traffickers, as well as ‘illegal migrants’ and those who would take advantage of the system. By 2022, the high number of Albanians arriving by small boats (c.12,300 Albanian nationals) was also problematised. **Victims** include the vulnerable, ‘genuine’ asylum seekers and refugees. Meanwhile, **heroes** are either the Home Office, the government, or its many partners. On some occasions, heroes are absent from the narrative.

**Settings** included a backdrop of the crises in Afghanistan and Ukraine, increased pressure from small boat Channel crossings that placed a strain on the asylum system and the COVID-19 pandemic. However, settings predominantly referred to legislative context and policy developments, with frequent reference to the Nationality and Borders Bill, the new plan for immigration, Home Office priorities and delivery plans, reflecting a more ‘technocratic’ style. Given that not all narrative components were present in policy documents, narrative **plots** were difficult to discern or absent.

**Moral/policy solutions** focus on the implementation of the New Plan for Immigration, supported by the Nationality and Borders Bill. More specifically, illegal migration must be tackled by disrupting the business model of people smugglers and deterring illegal entry. Moreover, work with partners such as France, in joint action to stop small boat crossings and strengthen activity in Channel against small boat movement was key. Finally, bilateral return agreements with countries of origin, such as Albania should be developed.

### *e) Circulation of Narratives in the ‘Communicative’ and ‘Coordinative’ Spheres*

The analysis of narratives on small boat arrivals in media and political narratives (communicative sphere) and policy-making narratives (coordinative sphere) reveals some intriguing findings. While not all narrative components or full narratives were present in policy documents, various narrative elements that point to narratives observed in the communicative sphere were identified. In fact, most narratives invoked by the government could also be observed in policy documentation, including narratives on tackling ‘illegal migration’, people smuggler gangs, and deterring migrants and irregular entry. This suggests that dominant narratives espoused by the government were **embraced** in more technocratic policy-making venues.

Moreover, no definitive examples of a government narrative being adapted in the coordinative sphere could be identified, nor instances of a dominant narrative espoused by the government being ignored in this case. However, we can observe a case of a narrative being at least



partially **rejected**. In an unusual move, the Home Office's most senior civil servant, Permanent Secretary Matthew Rycroft, published an open letter to Home Secretary Priti Patel, stating:

"I do not believe sufficient evidence can be obtained to demonstrate that the [Rwanda] policy will have a deterrent effect significant enough to make the policy value for money. This does not mean that the Migration and Economic Development Partnership cannot have the appropriate deterrent effect; just that there is not sufficient evidence for me to conclude that it will."(Home Office 2022a)

The extraordinary move to publish a letter that calls into question the cost-effectiveness of the Rwanda plan appeared to contest the Home Secretary's discourse and support opposition parties' narratives that questioned both the costs of the scheme and the extent to which it would act as a deterrent.

Finally, regarding narrative style, despite limited narrative content in policy documents, increased reference to legislative context/policy development, a focus on policy levers, increased complexity and abstraction to include a bigger picture, considering a broader set of factors, the above analysis suggests that the coordinative sphere embraced significant 'lay' narrative elements in policy documentation.

## 4. Conclusions across the three case studies

As illustrated in section 2, the last decade has seen the introduction of new immigration legislation, the implementation of a new post-Brexit visa regime, responses to multiple migration crises, and political crises linked to migration. Successive British governments have placed migration at the top of the agenda and front and centre of political campaigns; most recently, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak named 'stop the boats' as one of his five priorities while in office, and migration played a key role in debates on the UK's membership of the EU. Moreover, net migration to the UK has been slowly increasing since the early 1990s, with peaks and troughs along the way, but with significant increases post-COVID-19 pandemic.

However, the analysis of public salience, media salience and public opinion on immigration reveals some counterintuitive findings that provide important context for the discussion of narratives on migration in the UK. The salience of immigration peaked in the autumn of 2015 and has declined significantly since the summer of 2016. This suggests that the perception among the British public was that the issue had been resolved by the Brexit referendum. While salience increased again in 2021, in line with immigration being back on the political agenda, it has not reached the same levels. In fact, peaks in salience in November 2022 (21%) and, more recently, in September 2023 (26%) have not reached half the levels of September 2015 (56%). The apparent decline in the salience of immigration issues since the Brexit referendum is not reflected, however, in the media, which has increased coverage of immigration issues in recent years. Thus, patterns of media coverage of immigration do not directly correspond with public salience. Finally, public opinion polling data suggests that public sentiment towards immigration has become more positive year on year since 2014.

Moving now to the analysis of the three cases, in general, we see considerable alignment in narratives across the media, political debate and policy documents in the UK.



## How do narratives ‘travel’ across the media and political debate?

In all three case studies, considerable similarities are identified between narratives in the media and political debate. Moreover, there is evidence of intensive mutual influence across media and political narratives to the extent that narratives are almost indistinguishable. Therefore, there is very limited evidence of adaptation or apparent omissions in the narratives being picked up across media and political debate.

In the case of the EU relocation scheme and 2015 migration ‘crisis’, we can observe variegates in narratives along ideological lines. Thus, the right-wing and centre-right media are closely aligned with the UK government’s position, while the centre-left media closely coheres with the opposition narratives. This also applies to the case study on small boat arrivals. However, in this case, the centre-right media is more critical of the government’s position regarding the Rwanda plan and possible breaches of national and international law.

The Ukrainian case study represents an outlier. While there is considerable alignment in narratives across the media and political debate, variations in narratives do not fall along ideological lines. Both in the media and in political debate, actors of all ideological affiliations invoked narratives that are critical of or scrutinise the government’s position, calling for more to be done to support those fleeing Ukraine. It is also noteworthy that in contrast to the other two cases, narratives exclusively refer to ‘refugees’ as opposed to ‘migrants’ in the media and political debate.

There are also other areas of alignment in media and political debate across the ideological spectrum. In all three cases, the narrative on the UK’s humanitarian tradition (“proud history of offering sanctuary to those in need of refuge”) is invoked by both pro-government media and the government itself, as well as by the opposition (and the affiliated left-wing media) to support opposing narratives. This instrumentalisation of a ‘master’ narrative to fit the policy dilemma or crisis at hand supports existing research findings on the use of historical analogy in migration policy discourse (Kirkwood 2018; Bennett 2018). It also suggests that political actors will tend to swing behind more patriotic narratives of a heroic national response in times of crisis.

The cases also suggest that divergence across the ideological spectrum is most apparent in terms of the moral of the story (proposed policy solution). Pro-government media and the government itself swing strongly behind long-established UK narratives about the perceived ‘pull factors’, uncontrolled (illegal) immigration, invasion and border controls. In contrast, centre-left media, the Labour Party and the SNP appear less concerned about pull factors and border controls, adopting a broadly more humanitarian frame across all three cases.

There is also some evidence to suggest that the media played a significant role in setting the tone of narratives in the autumn of 2015 and on Ukraine. In the first case, the crisis reached its peak over the summer months when parliamentary business was in recess, creating a window of opportunity for the media to set the agenda. In the second, both pro-government media and left-wing media invoked humanitarian narratives and accused the government of being ‘out of step’ with the public, putting the government under pressure to deliver outcomes with the perception of public sentiment. While the media tended to foreground humanitarian narratives in both cases, politicians strategically deployed similar narratives to strengthen their political positions.

Finally, the analysis of narrative components supports the premise that narratives in the communicative sphere (both in the media and political debate) are predominantly 'lay' in style, with a slightly more technocratic style only observed in the more policy-driven parliamentary debates, such as debates on specific policy programmes.

### **How do these narratives, in turn, influence policymaking?**

As expected, policy documents in the UK adopted a much more technocratic style, invoking data, operational and policy detail, and covering a broader range of considerations. This made it considerably more challenging to 'read through' narratives from the communicative to the coordinative sphere. However, somewhat counterintuitively, considerable alignment was observed in narrative content across the two spheres.

In the case of the 2015 migration crisis, there was some divergence from political narratives in that policy documents do not focus on foreign aid and the UK's international role and responsibility, likely reflecting the fact that policy was developed in the Home Office (rather than the departments responsible for foreign policy and development aid). However, the substance of the narratives remained broadly aligned with those of the government's political discourse: notably, the notion that relocation might create a 'pull factor', and a focus on foreign aid and resettlement as policy solutions. This alignment with (government) political narratives demonstrates the close follow-through from media and political debate into policy documents on this issue.

A similar pattern can be observed in the case of small boat arrivals. Whilst policy documents adopted a much more technocratic style, the core narratives aligned with those of the government in political debate, once again, notably in relation to policy solutions: tackling 'illegal migration' by disrupting people smuggler gangs and deterring migrants and irregular entry. However, in this case, we also observe a senior official partially reject a government narrative on the Rwanda plan and request a remit to pursue the policy approach further, despite no evidence to support it would deliver the intended outcomes – cost-effectiveness and deterrence.

This notwithstanding, in both cases, we do not observe the type of 'decoupling' anticipated in the literature, where populist and restrictive rhetoric in the communicative sphere is not redeemed in policy practice. Despite limited narrative content in policy documents and increased reference to legislative context/policy development, a focus on policy levers, increased complexity and abstraction to include a bigger picture, considering a broader set of factors, the analysis illustrates that the coordinative sphere embraced significant 'lay' and popular narrative content in policy-making venues.

It is posited that this was not because the narratives dominating the public political sphere were already sufficiently plausible/evidence-based to also function in coordinative spheres, as proposed elsewhere (Boswell and Smellie 2023, 13). Or that political debate was sufficiently nuanced/sober to advance more technocratic narratives. Rather, the government had sufficient authority or 'clout' to see their policies through without concern for significant 'drift' from their public administration.

Conversely, the Ukrainian case is again an outlier. Comparing narratives in the media and political debate with policy documents reveals very few similarities beyond reference to the

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three new visa schemes for Ukrainians. The only alignment in narratives relates to the representation of characters. And yet, even here, there is some divergence as the gendered dimension of 'victims', so pronounced in the communicative sphere, does not appear in policy narratives. This suggests that the high political salience of the crisis put the government under pressure to deliver policy outcomes in line with public sentiment. It also supports the proposition that in this case, under immense pressure to deliver tangible policies in a short period of time, policy practice was decoupled from the more 'lay' narratives invoked in the political debate on how to respond to the Ukrainian refugee crisis.

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## Appendix 1. Interviews

Code	Organisation	Gender	Date
UK_I_1	Home Office	Man	5 June 2023
UK_I_2	Home Office	Man	6 June 2023
UK_I_3	APPG on Migration	Man	19 June 2023
UK_I_4	Scottish civil service	Woman	27 June 2023
UK_I_5	Home Office	Man	28 June 2023
UK_I_6	Home Office	Man	5 July 2023

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# BRIDGES

Assessing the production and impact of migration narratives

**BRIDGES:** Assessing the production and impact of migration narratives is a project funded by the EU H2020 Framework Programme for Research and Innovation and implemented by a consortium of 12 institutions from all over Europe. The project aims to understand the causes and consequences of migration narratives in a context of increasing politicisation and polarisation around these issues by focusing on six European countries: France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom. To do so, BRIDGES adopts an interdisciplinary and co-productive approach and is implemented by a diverse consortium formed by universities, think tanks and research centres, cultural associations, and civil society organisations.

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